



HONITON TOWN COUNCIL ROUNDBALL WOOD FACTSHEET NO. 1 The Mammals of Roundball Wood



Most of the mammals that live at Roundball Wood are nocturnal or very shy and are fairly difficult to see. Signs of mammals are often the most likely things you will see as you walk around the woods. For instance you may find chewed hazel nuts which woodmice, dormouse, bank vole and grey squirrels have eaten. Droppings of deer, badger and fox are sometimes found on the pathway. Badgers in particular use their droppings to mark their territories. Burrows, nests, and mole hills are other signs you can look for.



Badgers

Badgers

An enormous badger sett in the wood under a large beech tree (Badger's Beech) and along the southern boundary is the most obvious sign of mammals in the wood. Many sett entrances have been excavated in the meadow area on the southern boundary. Badgers are creatures of habit and create well-worn



paths to and from their setts and feeding grounds. Some setts are many centuries old and this one could well have been here for over 100 years. Setts need to be excavated in diggable soil (such as the greensand here) and also on a slope to avoid flooding, so Roundball is ideal for this.

Badger's Beech

Setts are often very extensive underground and have tunnels going in all directions and terminating in bed chambers. Badgers fill their bed chambers with straw from long grass areas and sometimes dead

bluebell stems. During the summer and autumn badgers drag the bedding outside the sett to dry out and air.



The main diet of badgers is earthworms so Roundball is ideal as the woodland is surrounded by pasture where they can forage. Look for tell-tale digging where the badgers have used their powerful claws to dig up the turf. *Beware of badger holes in the long grass.*

Badger Sett at Roundball

Dormice

Now becoming very rare this elusive, nocturnal creature is very hard to spot. Surveys in the wood have not revealed their presence yet but they are known to live in the area and Devon is a stronghold in the UK for the species. Dormice are tiny gingery creatures with long furry tails. They eat a variety of foods during their active season including flowers, berries, pollen, grubs, insects, nuts and fruit. Hazel nuts chewed by dormice have a very distinctive neat round hole gnawed in the side. For much of the year dormice hibernate or go into torpor to save energy. Hibernation is from early October to mid April in this area depending on how cold it is, so they are asleep for up to 7 months!



Dormouse

During the day they can go into torpor, this is when they go into a deep sleep, and reduce their temperature and heart rate. It takes them a few minutes to arouse from torpor but when they are awake they are pretty active and agile. Dormice make nests, often of shredded honeysuckle bark, moss and fresh leaves, up in trees – either in forks or tree holes – but they hibernate in larger leafy nests on the ground. Roundball Wood has plenty of suitable trees and feeding opportunities for dormouse so it is very likely they are present.

Other mammals

Many other mammals live in Roundball Wood. Roe deer are often solitary and like to live in cover in woodland. They have a gingery coat with short knobby antlers and shiny black noses. Although they can sometimes be seen during the day if it is quiet they usually feed at dusk or at night. Deer can have a negative impact on woodland if they overgraze the new tree saplings and prevent regeneration.

Roe Deer



Small mammals such as shrews, wood mice, moles and bank voles are widespread throughout the area and you may see nuts chewed by woodmice and bank voles.

Shrews eat invertebrates such as insects and worms, so do moles whose distinctive 'hills' are the easiest way to tell this species is around.

Wood Mouse

One of the commonest woodland mammals is the grey squirrel. Originally introduced from the US they are now extremely widespread and have been blamed for the decline of our native red squirrels which no longer occur in Devon. Grey squirrels like to eat hazel nuts and pine cones and often leave shattered nut shells strewn on the ground. They make leafy nests high in the trees but also come down to the ground. They can eat bird eggs and fledgelings and also damage trees by stripping bark in the winter.

Rabbits can be seen in the pastures but rarely venture into the wood. These common creatures were introduced by the Normans over 1000 years ago and were originally farmed in warrens for meat.

Looking for the rabbits the local foxes will also visit the wood on their evening patrols but sometimes you may catch a glimpse of one during the day, especially when they are feeding cubs. Foxes are predators and rabbits, wood pigeons, pheasants and mice are their main diet. With their excellent sense of smell and acute hearing they will usually run off if they see you unless you keep still and quiet.

Bats are covered in a separate factsheet.

Tips for watching mammals

- **Prepare yourself:**
 - Dawn and dusk are the best times for watching most mammal species,
 - Wearing dark clothing will help camouflage you.
 - Carry binoculars to help improve your sightings from a distance.
- **Remember:** Most mammal species have better senses of sight, hearing and smell than us!
 - Avoid noisy clothes or objects such as jangling keys and mobile phones and don't talk or make noises.

- Avoid making any sudden movements.
- Go out in pairs or very small groups to increase your chances of sightings.
- Find a vantage point where your shape doesn't stand out against the skyline. For example by crouching low to the ground, or staying close to vegetation or against a tree.
- Keep the wind in your face as most mammals would otherwise be able to smell you downwind.
- Always approach animals slowly, trying to stay hidden. If spotted stay still, the animal may choose to ignore you if you don't appear to pose a threat, or may even come to investigate.
- **Badger Watching:**
 - Sit very still and quiet close to a badger sett at dusk.
 - Don't forget to position yourself downwind and in a place where your outline is hidden (e.g. against a tree).
 - Ensure you have an unobstructed view, as it may become more difficult to see the sett as it gets dark.
 - Be patient!

Written by Sue Searle for Honiton Town Council – copyright reserved 2009.