Dormice on the Move in Nottinghamshire…

Since our last update on the Nottinghamshire Dormouse Project, all three of the reintroductions, Treswell Wood (2013), Eaton Wood (2014) and Gamston Wood (2015) have proven successful. Not only have the dormice been found to have dispersed throughout the respective woodlands, but they have also begun to spread into the wider landscape.

In February 2019, the Nottinghamshire Dormouse Group (NDG) were granted permission to install nest-boxes within a small private woodland (Silcock Wood) abutting the western edge of Gamston Wood (Figure 1). The woodland covers an area of circa 8ha and was planted on agricultural fields approximately 25 years ago as part of a woodland grant scheme.

Figure 1: The yellow polygon highlights the location of Silcock Wood, abutting the western edge of Gamston Wood.

On the 14th February 2019, ten dormouse boxes were installed within the woodland along the edge of the only path present, roughly 24m – 30m from the earth banks that mark the boundary of Gamston Wood. The boxes were set in a transect, approximately 20m apart.

The boxes were first monitored on the 21st April 2019; however, no evidence of dormice was recorded. The following month (19th May 2019) a characteristic dormouse nest was present within one of the boxes along with a heavily pregnant female dormouse. During the June (2019) monitoring check, the female dormouse was still found to be present, along with a litter of six grey eyes closed (GEC). In July, three of the boxes contained dormouse nests, with a total of three dormice recorded. By August (2019), eight of the ten dormouse boxes contained dormouse nests, with two of the nests containing litters, and another containing a single individual.

Off the back of this news, the landowner gave NDG permission to install ten more nest-boxes. The boxes were installed on the 31st August 2019, and were positioned further into the woodland, with the furthest box situated approximately 100m from Gamston Wood.

During the installation of the final box (number 20), a heavily pregnant dormouse was observed running up a young sapling, close to the position of the box. On further investigation, a wild nest was discovered at the base of the sapling (Figure 2).

Figure 2: The heavily pregnant dormouse & wild dormouse nest found whilst installing nest-boxes.

By October 2019, five of the ten newly installed nest-boxes contained dormouse nests, with five dormice recorded. The October monitoring check recorded a total of ten dormice within the twenty nest-boxes.

By October 2020, 14 of the 20 nest-boxes had recorded dormice, and further dormice had been recorded in wild nests and nest-tubes (installed as a separate project in September 2020). The total number of dormice recorded over the 2020 season was whopping 73, including all life stages.

In May 2020, permission was granted by Network Rail to install nest-boxes along their landholding. Five nest-boxes were initially installed along a stretch of the eastern side of the rail line. The line is live and supports 100mph trains, consequently, the nest-boxes were installed from outside of the landholding, on trees that could be reached without the need to cross the boundary fence.

In July 2020, a dormouse nest was recorded in the furthest box, approximately 91m from the southernmost edge of Silcock Wood. Towards the end of August (2020), three more nest-boxes were installed, taking the line up to the edge of the field.

During the final monitoring check of the season (17th October 2020), a dormouse was recorded in a dormouse nest within nest-box 4, and an unoccupied dormouse nest was recorded in nest-box 7 (170m from the private Silcock Wood; Figure 3).

Figure 3: The yellow pin marks the location of the dormouse recorded along the Network Rail line.

In Spring of 2020 we set our sights on recording wider dispersal around Treswell Wood. Permission was granted by the landowner to install dormouse nest-boxes in a small area of woodland named Lady Wood. The woodland is situated approximately 0.5km (as the crow flies) from the westernmost tip of Treswell Wood.

Lady Wood is a semi-natural broadleaved woodland and has been in situ since at least 1835 (according to historic maps). It is not listed on the Ancient Woodland Inventory; however, this is likely to due to the small size of the woodland. Ladywood was originally named Norwood, suggesting a much older history and the irregular shape of the woodland indicates that it is likely to predate the surrounding fields. The woodland is coppiced on a small scale by the landowner for occasional firewood.

In March 2020, five dormouse boxes were installed on hazel coppice, surrounding a patch of bramble scrub. A further five boxes were added towards the end of July 2020. The boxes were checked each month, but no dormouse evidence was found to be present. However, during the final monitoring session of the year (18th October 2020) three of the ten boxes contained dormouse nests and one sub-adult male was present in one of the nests (Figure 4).

The shortest route to get to Lady Wood from Treswell Wood without having to cross open ground, via two stretches of hedgerow and along one small woodland copse (Figure 4) is approximately 625m. We are now hoping to install further boxes to create a separate NDMP site.

Figure 4: The yellow pin marks the location of a dormouse recorded in Lady Wood. The blue line maps the shortest route from Treswell Wood.

During the 2021 survey season we will be concentrating our efforts on determining wider dormouse dispersal within the landscape surrounding Eaton Woods. We have approached the landowners of two small woodlands situated to the north of Eaton Wood, both are connected via intact hedgerows, with the shortest routes being 300m and 570m, respectively (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Landscape to the north of Eaton Wood. The yellow polygons highlight the target woodlands & the blue Lines mark the shortest route via the hedgerow networks.

Does this mass exodus mean that our resident dormice have left the reintroduction woodlands…? Not in the slightest. During the last two seasons (2019 & 2020) overall dormouse numbers have continued to rise and this season we have recorded several wild nests, some with occupants.

Because of the spring lockdown we were unable to undertake an April monitoring check. However, the remaining checks (May to October) were carried out by licence holders only (working singularly or in leap-frogging pairs, to maintain social distancing).

The graph illustrated in Figure 6 shows the total number of dormice recorded during the NDMP box-checks for each of the woodlands during 2020. These totals do not include any of the ad hoc dormice, for example, those found in wild nests (Figure 12), recorded by the bird ringers in bird boxes or dormice in nest-tubes. The total number of nest-boxes in each of the woodlands are Treswell Wood (160), Eaton Wood (99), Gamston Wood (122), and Silcock Wood (20).

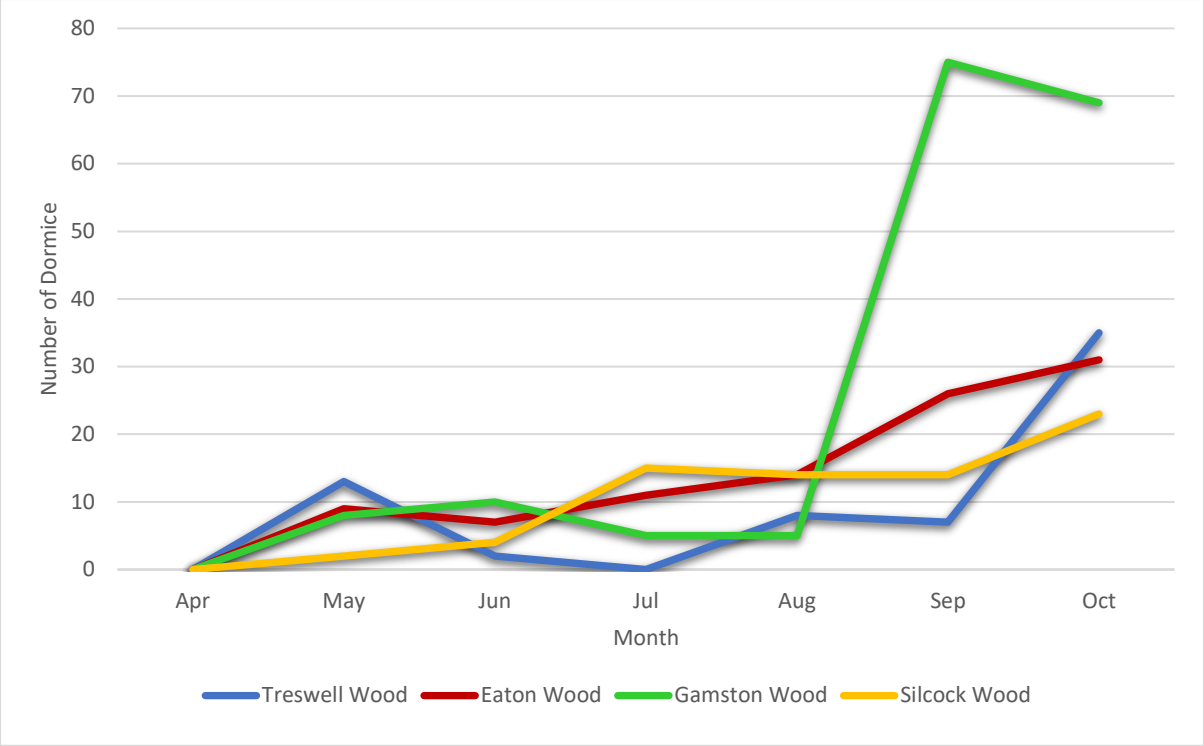

Figure 6: Graph showing the total number of dormice recorded per month in each of the woodlands during 2020.

In 2017, the existing woodland management plans for the three woodlands had reached their 10-year expiration dates, and the plans were subsequently updated by the Nottinghamshire Wildlife Trust (owners of the woodlands). Part of the new management prescriptions included works to restore some of the overstood coppice compartments and thinning of previously non-intervention / unmanaged compartments. Most of the work was concentrated within Eaton Wood, as historically this woodland had received the least management over the past 10 – 20 years or so.

Over a period of 3-years, three of the most neglected sections of Eaton Wood were subjected to a period of concentrated management and regeneration compartments were created by selectively felling a high percentage of the overstood trees to allow natural regeneration. These compartments were then further enhanced by supplementary planting, to increase the existing stocking densities as well as to enhance the species diversity.

Old nest-boxes were also removed from unproductive areas, and new ones installed into scrubby compartments that had regenerated following recent (approx. 5-7 years) coppice operations.

In 2018, dormouse numbers increased (Figure 7), with several litters found in each of the woodlands. It is hoped, that once the recently worked compartments have had time to regenerate (the next 2 or 3 years), dormice will move back into these areas, resulting in a further increase in annual totals.

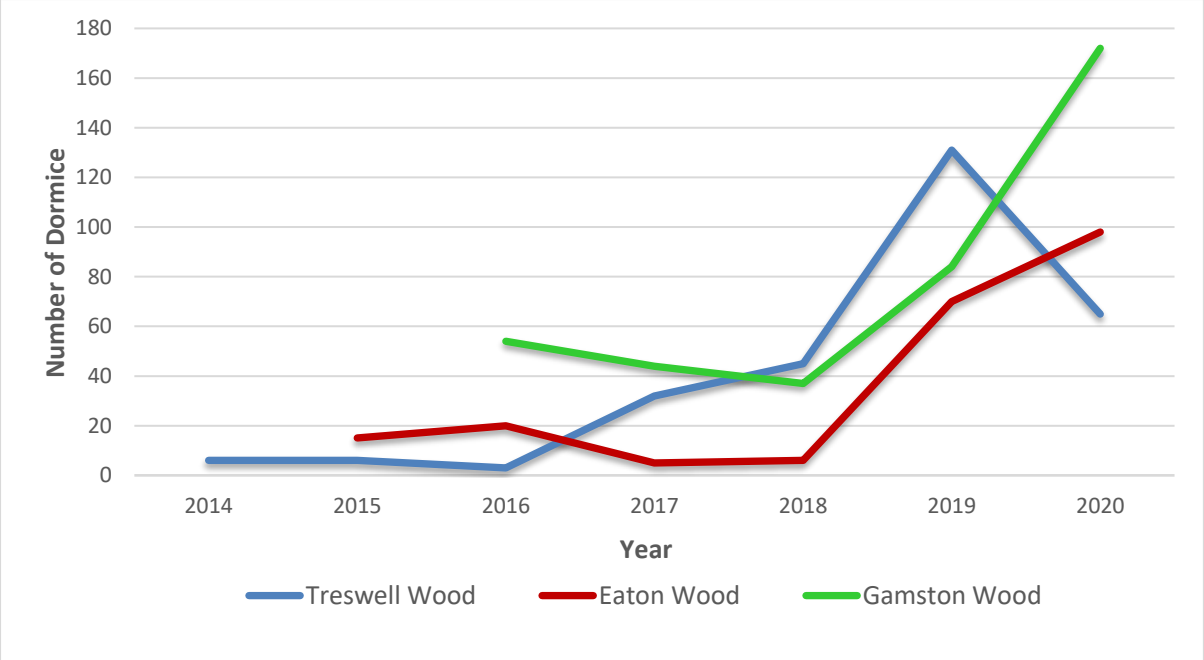

Figure 7: Graph showing the total number of dormice recorded during the NDMP checks in the three reintroduction woodlands, per year (minus the respective release year).

The following graphs highlight the most production dormouse compartments within each of the three woodlands: Treswell Wood (Figure 8), Eaton Wood (Figure 9) and Gamston Wood (Figure 10). This information will help us to determine which sections to concentrate our efforts in terms of future woodland management.

Figure 8: Total number of dormice recorded in each of the woodland compartments in Treswell Wood during 2020.

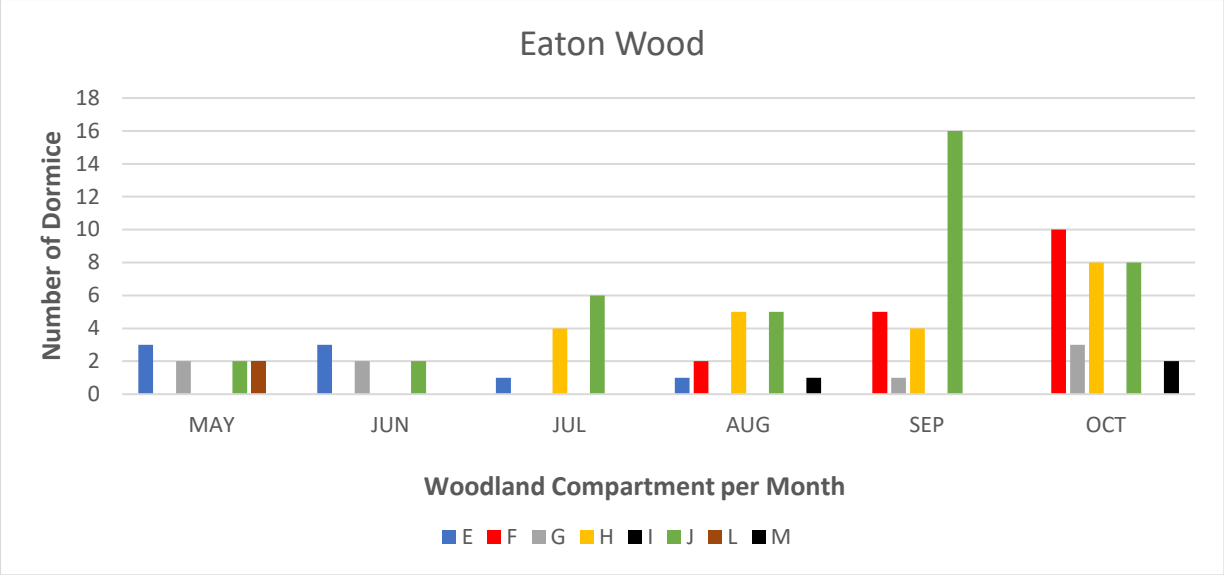

Figure 9: Total number of dormice recorded in each of the woodland compartments in Eaton Wood during 2020.

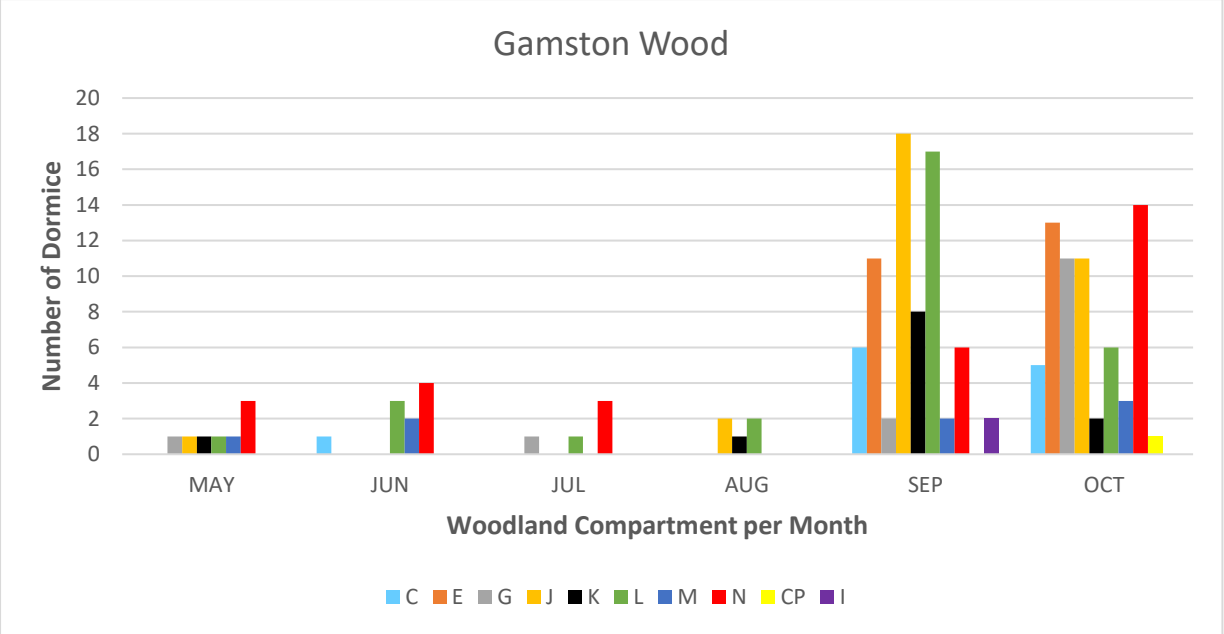

Figure 10: Total number of dormice recorded in each of the woodland compartments in Gamston Wood during 2020.

During the September (2020) monitoring check one of the licence holders recorded a dormouse in Gamston Wood with a remarkably long white tip (Figure 11). We often record a high ratio of white-tipped dormice in this woodland, and now record each occurrence as part of our standard biometrics. This particular white-tip measured approximately 23mm. The female dormouse in question was present in a nest-box with mum and six siblings, all but one of the dormice had white-tips of varying sizes.

Figure 11: 23mm white-tail tip.

Figure 12: Dormouse peeking out of a wild nest in Treswell Wood.

And finally, we have also captured some great dormouse footage this year using our motion detection cameras, including rarely seen footage of a mum marshalling her litter up a tree https://youtu.be/plY1820H4UA is she teaching them movement behaviours? Fingers crossed that our next project update in five years' time will provide us with more good news, and our dormice continue on the move in Nottinghamshire.