

Whitchurch Nature Notes (13)
Fat dormice/ *Glis glis*



Have you heard squeaking coming from the trees and hedges at night when walking your dog, or maybe the sound of scuttling in your loft or wall cavities, keeping you awake; or even your cat bringing you a trophy of a very fluffy tail? If so, you may well have heard or seen the telltale evidence of fat dormice which are now living in and around Whitchurch. People have either never heard of these furry critters ("*Glis glis* – what on earth is that?") or they are very familiar with them, and not in a good way!



They are common on the Continent but were brought to the UK in 1902 by Walter Rothschild, and accidentally released at Tring in Hertfordshire. They have gradually spread southwards through the Chilterns where they are now found in many woodland and suburban areas. The fat dormouse spends much of its time high in tree branches, so is not often seen. They damage trees by chewing bark, buds and growing shoots. They eat nuts, fruits and seeds but also birds' eggs and nestlings, and bats – in fact any small animals that they can catch. They can be mistaken for a small grey squirrel because they have a bushy tail and grey fur. However, they only come out at night whereas grey squirrels are active only in the daytime.

Glis glis are also known as edible dormice because the Romans used to keep them in captivity and deliberately overfeed them to make a succulent meal. The resourceful Romans designed a special terracotta jar called a glirarium in which they kept them to fatten up on acorns and nuts before serving them roasted. Apparently, in Slovenia, trapping and eating the wild edible dormice remains an active tradition.





In the wild they eat extra food in late summer to fatten themselves and build up reserves before hibernating in the winter. 2025 was what is termed a 'mast year' because the oak and beech trees produced bumper crops of their acorns and beech mast respectively. Surprisingly, this year the beech trees in our area are again producing heavy crops of beech mast, and this seems to have resulted in a plague population of *glis glis*, much to many people's misery!

There are firsthand reports from residents in Checkendon of these unstoppable critters finding their way into walls and ceilings, electric junction boxes, downpipes and now even the sewers! They are seeking nice warm dry places to hibernate through October to April. The biggest concern is the damage they do to electric wiring; last year, residents in Checkendon had an intermittent problem with their electricity supply for months and eventually SSE located the root of the problem – a substation packed with dead and dying fat dormice bodies.

The legal status of these invasive non-native creatures is very curious, in the light of the serious problems they are now bringing to the Chilterns area. According to the Mammal Society UK website, they are on the Red List for Britain's mammals (in imminent risk of extinction). They are legally protected in the UK under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, and it is therefore illegal to trap and harm them without a specific licence from Natural England. This does seem a very questionable bit of legislation for a non-native species because they not only are now spreading their range and causing much damage to wiring and buildings, but they predate our native woodland wildlife.

Maybe this could be an opportunity for a resourceful entrepreneur in 'wild food' – anyone for roasted *glis glis*??



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