

MAMMALS ON ROADS UPDATE

people-powered conservation

July 2014

Thank you for taking part in this year's *Mammals on Roads* or for helping in past years' surveys. A survey form is enclosed with this update and a free app is available from the App Store and Google Play, making taking part as easy as a couple of clicks. The iOS and Android app was chosen by *BBC Wildlife* magazine as one of the best citizen science apps, so please give it a go. Please don't use the app if you're the driver however – it's for mammal spotters in the passenger or back seats only.

Changing counts

The numbers from last year's survey are still being crunched but two trends already stand out - that of hedgehogs and rabbits.

Counts of hedgehogs continue a downward trend (Figure 1, overleaf), although sightings were up on the number the previous year. The findings of *Mammals on Roads*, thanks to the efforts of everyone involved, have been a big spur to hedgehog conservation, adding firm evidence to anecdotal bones of a decline, and they are still a cause for concern.

One criticism, sometimes levelled at the survey, is that counts of road casualties are as much an indication of

the numbers of cars as they are of animal numbers, and that there the number of cars on our roads has changed in the time since the survey began in 2001. The relationship between traffic flow, roadkill numbers and an animal's abundance isn't necessarily straightforward but we can be confident that the survey isn't just monitoring traffic: a study, soon to be published in the scientific journal *Applied Ecology and Environmental Research*, found that counts of either hedgehog or rabbit casualties were unaffected by changes in traffic flow. Changes in counts are likely to reflect changes in abundance. So, counting the dead is a way to monitor the living, and, with the help of hundreds of volunteers, *Mammals on Roads* is the best way we have to do that.

Rabbit counts

The other species to show a downward trend isn't one that jumps to mind when conservation is discussed. Sightings of rabbits make up the largest group of records (40-50% of all sightings) in the survey and, year to year, their numbers can change markedly. But counts per 100km are a third lower than at the start of the survey, and since 2006, the decline is even steeper (Figure 2, overleaf). This matches the finding of another survey (records of mammals in the British Trust for Ornithology's



Paul Bunyard

Rabbits, dead or alive, are not such a common sighting on our road as they were in 2006

Breeding Bird Survey) that found that records of rabbits fell by almost a half (46%) between 1995 and 2010. Rabbits are still common and widespread here, but in their native range (Spain, Portugal, western France and northern Africa) populations are thought to be just 5% of what they were in 1950, and the species is listed as 'Near threatened' (almost qualifying as 'Vulnerable') on the IUCN Red List.

It is only sixty years ago that 99% of rabbits in England, Scotland and Wales were killed by myxomatosis, with dramatic consequences for the countryside and other wildlife. This time, another virus, Rabbit Haemorrhagic Disease, might be responsible. But whether this is the cause, or just one of several factors responsible, is not known. We ought to be mindful that wild populations can disappear before you know it – and if actions are going to prevent such losses, we need to keep track of how species are faring.

Helping us monitor Britain's wildlife

Scientific knowledge of how our wildlife is changing underpins conservation efforts and informs how our countryside is managed. *Mammals on Roads* is a real contribution to that knowledge -- and getting involved is easy.

The data collected will be submitted to the National Biodiversity Network and may be shared with others in a summary form but PTES will never pass on the personal details of participants.

If you have questions about any aspect of the survey, please do not hesitate to contact me, either by telephone or by email: david@ptes.org.

Thank you for all your help. Happy counting and we look forward to receiving your records later in the year.

Taking part

Surveys can be anytime in July, August or September and should be routes of 20 miles or more (not including stretches of dual-carriageway or motorway, or through urban areas). Even if you don't spot any mammals, please include the journey in your records, as this information is just as important.

If you can resurvey journeys made in previous years, please do, but remember that you should not record the same route more than once in any 14-day period. Whether you survey a single route or numerous ones, every record is valuable to us.

The simplest way to record your sightings is with the *Mammals on Roads* app, free to download from the App Store or Google Play. Full details of how to take part are included on the survey forms.

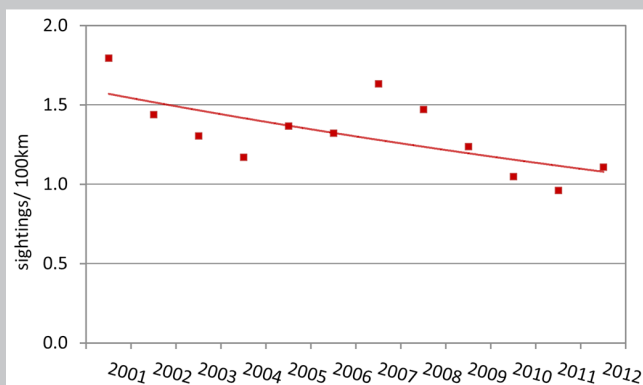


Figure 1 (left) Counts of hedgehogs per 100km (62mi) along journeys in Great Britain. The trend for the whole survey, since its start in 2001, is shown by the line.

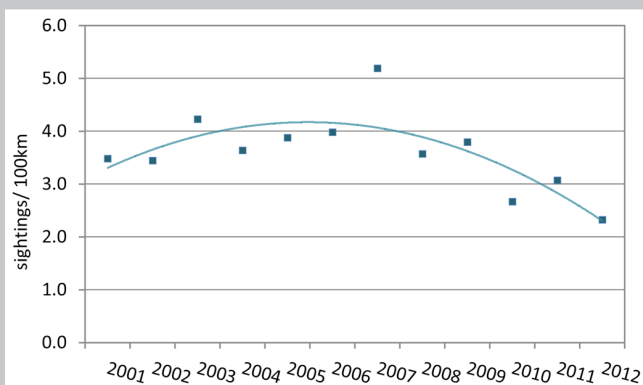


Figure 2 (right) Counts of rabbits per 100km (62mi) along journeys in Great Britain. The trend is shown by the line.