Living with Mammals update 2015

people's trust for endangered species

We can overlook the familiar. We take the mundane and commonplace for granted and rarely look closely at them—but we ought to. Jennifer Owen is a biologist who moved to Leicester and began recording the species in her suburban garden. Thirty years on, she had identified 2,673 species of animal and plant, including 20 that no-one had recorded in Britain before and four that were entirely new to science.

Records collected each year in *Living with Mammals* might not be of new species but they are just as significant, uncovering trends in how populations are changing that wouldn't be apparent otherwise. Thank you for making this possible. Over 600 people took part in 2015, volunteering their knowledge and time, and in the 13 years that the survey has run to date, it has benefited from the efforts and commitment of over 3,000 volunteers. Thank you!

How populations are changing

The proportion of sites that recorded hedgehogs rose this year (Figure 1a), but taking the results at face value can be misleading. People taking part for the first time may do so because they see hedgehogs in

© Erni / Shutterstock.com

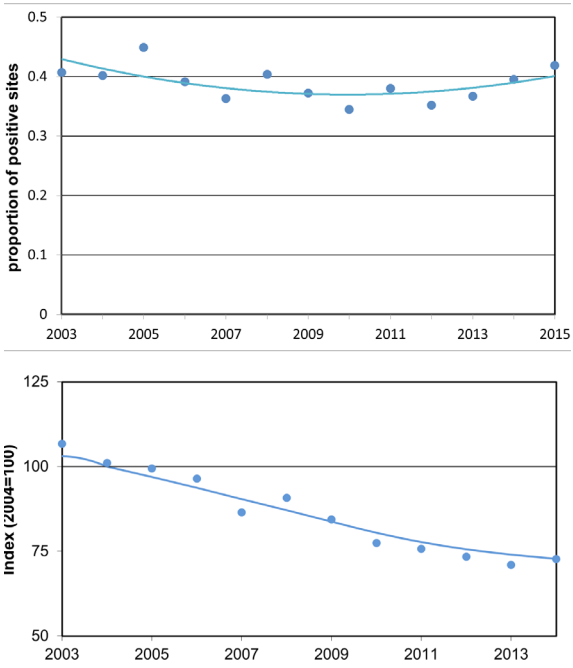


Figure 1 The proportion of sites (blue circles) that recorded hedgehogs in each year of the survey (1a). The underlying trend (blue line) dips slightly but otherwise changes little. When analysed in more depth, however, taking into account factors that may vary from year to year, the results shows a significant decline in the proportion of sites (1b). The value for each year is expressed relative to that in 2004, which is given a value of 100 for comparison.

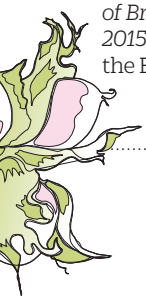
their garden—someone whose garden isn't home to wild mammals is less likely to join the survey. So the proportion of sites at which a species is spotted may be a biased measure. When other aspects are taken into account (those things that vary from year to year and that might affect the likelihood of spotting a species) and looking only at those sites that took part in two or more years, a less hopeful picture appears (Figure 1b). In this case, the trend is sharply downward, and since the start of the survey in 2003, the proportion of sites has fallen by over a quarter.

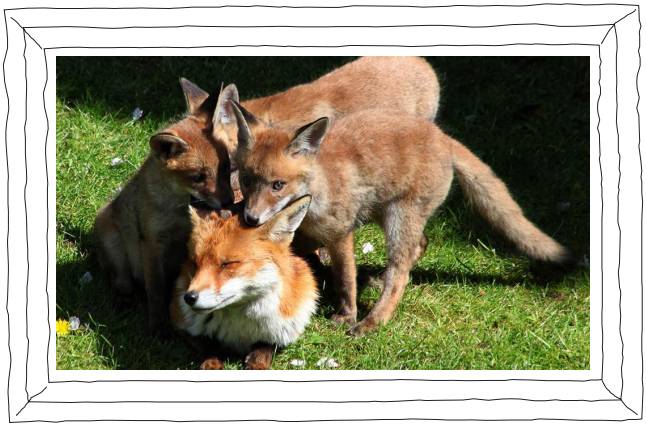
The hedgehog decline seen in *Living with Mammals* shows up in other surveys, as well. Together, the data were published in the *State of Britain's Hedgehogs 2015* report by PTES and the British Hedgehog Preservation Society, last month, and have been key to conservation efforts. The report is available on our website at: ptes.org/state_of_britains_hedgehogs/.

Foxes and grey squirrels are the two wild species recorded most frequently in *Living with Mammals*, turning up at 58 and 77% of sites respectively in 2015. In fact, wood mice and bank voles are probably as common but, being smaller and more active during the night, are more likely to go undetected. Foxes and grey squirrels have their supporters and detractors alike, but it is clear that we are not being overrun by them. The proportion of sites recording each species year to year shows a more or less level trend over the thirteen years since *Living with Mammals* started (Figures 2a and 3a, opposite and overleaf) and, unlike that for hedgehogs, a more detailed analysis supports the idea that the populations haven't changed (Figures 2b and 3b, opposite and overleaf).

Less common species

Badgers and rabbits are less common visitors to urban green spaces, reported at 18% (just under a fifth) and 23% (just under a quarter) of sites respectively this year. Scarcer still are shrews (at 12% of sites) and some species that might seem unlikely urban residents. Six of the 11 terrestrial mammal species (other than bats) identified as 'priority' species in the UK Biodiversity Action Plan were recorded in 2015. As well as hedgehogs, one site recorded red squirrels; water voles and hazel dormouse were each recorded at two sites; otters, at three; and brown hares, at 13 sites. Although it's not possible with so few records to

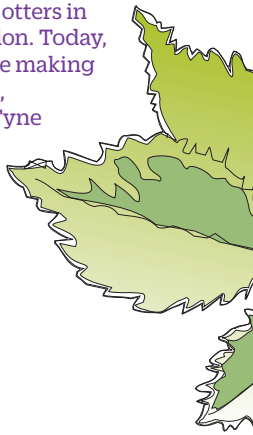




Stephen Almond

While the activities of foxes can be a nuisance for some people, for others the opportunity to watch firsthand the behaviour of a wild mammal is a joy. Seeing wildlife like this makes an invaluable connection to the natural world.

Little over a generation ago, otters in Britain were close to extinction. Today, although still scarce, they are making their way into urban centres, including Newcastle-upon-Tyne and London.



say how populations are changing over time, records of less common species are important for understanding distribution.

Between 2009 and 2011, otters were recorded in every English county as part of a national survey, but there are still only around 1,600 in England. Otters are nudging their way into our towns and cities as a result of improved water quality and the return of fish stocks to rivers. Few people are lucky enough to see a wild otter and records are almost always from field signs such as droppings (known as 'spraints') or tracks. Occasionally, there are reports of otters catching prized ornamental carp in garden ponds but we should consider ourselves lucky to share our habitat with such an extraordinary animal.

Water voles need all the help they can get. A long-term decline looks to be continuing, the result of habitat loss from unsympathetic riverbank management and predation by American mink. Urban

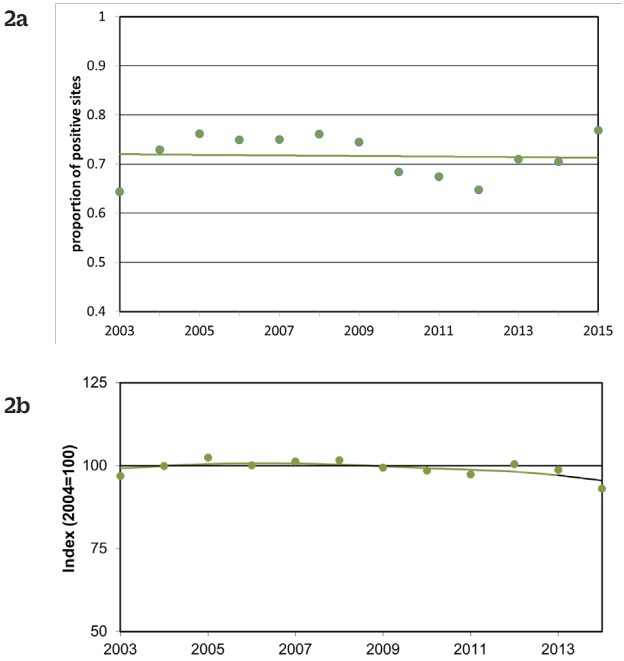


Figure 2 The proportion of sites (green circles) that recorded foxes each year (2a) and the estimated proportion (relative to that in 2004) taking into account other factors that may vary (2b). The underlying trend for each (green line) shows that foxes are no more common now than when the survey began in 2003.

areas may offer a refuge from mink but they can also have risks. At sites where water voles co-exist with brown rats, poison used to kill the latter will have the same effect on the former—so it is important that we know where water voles are present.

Thank you for taking part in *Living with Mammals*. Recording urban wildlife is important if we want to keep and improve the natural value of the places where we live and work. We hope you will able to help us again in 2016 and to continue to build our knowledge and inform conservation.

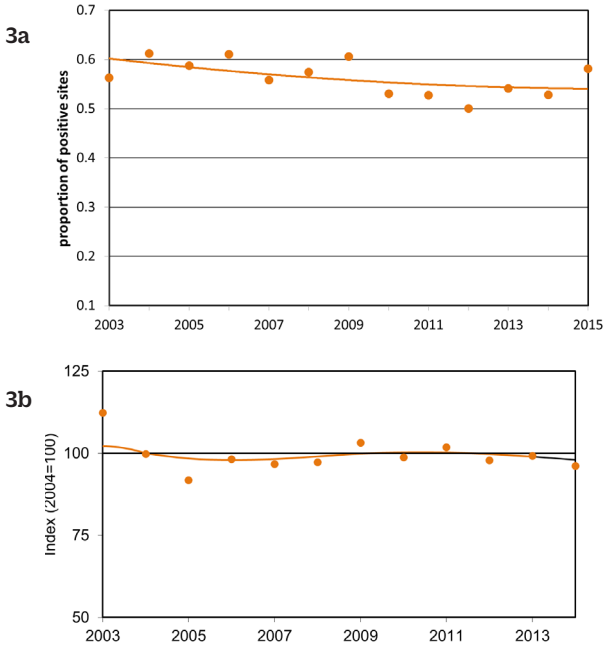


Figure 3 The proportion of sites (orange circles) that recorded grey squirrels each year (3a and 3b), shown as in Figures 1 and 2.

Gill Howarth

Sian Walters

Susan M Brown

The grey squirrel, badgers and muntjac shown here are some of the many images taken by surveyors this year. Thank you to everyone who sent in pictures.