

Nature Notes - Autumn 2023



The arrival of October and November begins a quiet time for much wildlife. Many of our mammals, reptiles and birds will have spent the last months preparing, and now some will be entering hibernation, whilst others will have cached a food supply for the barren winter.

Hibernation is thought to be triggered by the shorter days. Mammals will reduce their metabolic rate, their heart rate and reduce their body temperature to close to ambient. This reduces their need for food.

Dormice will tightly weave themselves a nest at ground level. This may be in thick undergrowth or hedges, on old coppice stools, in log piles or in moss. It needs to be cool, stable and moist. They will have increased their body weight to between 15 and 18 grams. It is very unusual to see this, but they will roll up with their tail curled over their belly and face. From time to time they make wake and move.

A consequence of the reduced demands on their body is that they can be long lived, often to 5 or 6 years old.

Other small mammals such as mice and voles do not hibernate. Mice will try to move inside and find a dry and warm location, only venturing out if food supplies become short. Voles moult and build up a dense layer of fur for winter. Moles also remain active underground.

However, bats do hibernate and may well remain in this state as late as May. They hibernate in buildings, bat boxes and underground when suitable caves are available. As with dormice they may occasionally awake and move. The critical food source they need is flying insects, which are not available through the winter.

Reptiles are commonly said to hibernate, but many scientists differentiate and say they brumate.

This is because unlike mammals they cannot regulate their own body temperature, so it is the reduction in ambient temperature that causes them to overwinter in an inactive state. Normally they will find a place to hide away, such as a log pile, although some frogs can bury themselves in the mud at the bottom of a pond.

In the late 18th Century there was some belief that swallows also hibernate. Gilbert White discusses it a number of times in his writings and was always cautious. The doubt was caused by the lateness of some swallows appearance in the countryside, although he was aware of migration. It wasn't until the 19th Century that this theory was debunked.

The need for wildlife to survive brings into focus how important the natural harvest of berries and nuts are. These are primary food resources for hibernating animals, as well as those who remain active but have to be prepared.