Mice with clogs on!

The Glis glis, otherwise known as the edible or fat dormouse, can be a localised problem in the Luton, Aylesbury Beaconsfield area, but is poised for population expansion! Richard Strand from Pest Information Consultancy reviews the current situation.

In 1902, following a visit to Hungary, Baron Rothschild brought six live edible dormice (Glis glis) back home to his country estate at Ting in Hertfordshire. Some, or all, of them escaped and discovered that their local environment suited them very well. A hundred years later we have a localised pest problem caused by these creatures in an area of approximately 200 sq miles in a triangle between, Luton, Aylesbury and Beaconsfield. Their numbers are now estimated at between an official 10,000, or perhaps more at an estimated between an official 10,000, or 10,000, or fat dormouse. The Romans regarded them as a delicacy, keeping them in clay pots as a snack. They are still eaten to this day in Slovenia.

They hibernate for seven months of the year. Judging by the acquisition of their name which comes from Anglo-Norman dormeaus, which means ‘sleepy’ (one). The word was altered by folk etymology to resemble the word ‘mouse’. This sleeping habit led to various nicknames such as ‘the seven sleepers’, in addition to the appearance in Lewis Carroll’s Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland where the frequently asleep dormouse sat between the March Hare and the Mad Hatter during the Mad Tea Party.

Glis glis resemble a small squirrel about eight inches (20 cm) in length with grey fur with yellow or white underneath and a bushy tail. They have large rounded ears and small, dark eyes that look larger than they are as they are encircled by rings of darker fur. They produce one litter of up to 11 young per year in late summer. Their normal habitat is in woodland in central and southern France, northern Spain and southern Europe, where they spend most of their time in the tree canopy.

As may be expected from their preferred habitat, they are agile climbers and tend to a fairly restricted home range of about 100 m in diameter. They are nocturnal, sleeping during the day in tree hollows or compact nests built from twigs. They live together in loose colonies although there is little obvious hierarchy within the groups. They have an omnivorous diet, including nuts, seeds and grain, some insects and the occasional small bird, but with a high proportion of fruit – particularly apples. They are renowned for decimating apple stores and for killing saplings by stripping them of their bark.

In some respects these little creatures are endearing. Apart from looking cute (described by some as ‘an evolutionary trait to prevent its wholesale extermination’), they entertain by running up vertical window panes and then sliding down them. They are also quite vocal making a ‘woofle, woofle, woofle’ sound. One observer noted that they made a sound like a lawn mower (the author is unsure whether petrol or electric; rotary or cylinder!).

In their continental European environment these rodents will hibernate outdoors, but in our rather cooler climate hibernating Glis glis head indoors. And herein lies our problem as they choose attics, lofts and farm buildings.

Once installed in a roof space they are both noisy and destructive. Householders affected by them describe them as ‘jumping about all night long’. More seriously they, like other rodents, chew through cables and pipes. As the Chilterns boast some of the most expensive real estate in the country, it is not surprising that the owners and occupiers have the ability to make their displeasure at the invasion, well known.

The other problem that residents face is that Glis glis is a protected species under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. It might seem unusual for an invasive species that has been resident in the UK for little more than 100 years to warrant protective status, but Gliridae are protected under the 1979 Bern Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats, to which the United Kingdom is a signatory.

As with squirrels, householders can attempt to prevent the creatures getting into their roof spaces in the first place. Tree branches overhanging the roof should be cut back and, whilst the loft is free of the animals, holes and gaps should be blocked with chicken wire to prevent access without inhibiting ventilation.

Glis glis can only be controlled under the General licence issued by Natural England. This licence (WM/GenL27) has recently been amended and is now available on the Natural England website at www.naturalengland.org.uk/cwrrg/reproduction/wildlife/species/edibledormouse.aspx/legal. Before using this licence, individuals must register with Natural England. The purpose of the licence is to preserve public health and public safety or for the purpose of preventing serious damage to crops, fruit, foodstuffs for livestock and growing timber.

Only spring traps authorised under the ‘Spring Trap Approval (Variation) (England) Order 2007’ may be used to kill the Edible Dormouse. These include the Salway Spring Trap Mk 4, the Salway Spring Trap Mk 6 and the Kania Trap 2500, or any spring trap which is equivalent in all respects. Live capture traps may also be used. As with other non-native species, once caught the animals must be destroyed humanely as they cannot be released back into the wild.

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A record of all Glis glis captured must be kept and submitted to Natural England Wildlife Licensing Unit.

For pest controllers then, this pest is something of a curiosity. A pest that most are unlikely to encounter. It has been observed, however, that year on year their range is spreading, slowly at present, but if conditions suit.......

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