

The purpose of this leaflet is to make land managers aware of the presence of harvest mice in grassy road verges and to encourage them to take these animals into account when conducting their operations. Grass verge and hedgerow management is divided between a number of different bodies and is not co-ordinated. We offer guidance on the best times to mow and maintain verges so as to create the minimum negative impact on this important species, which is dependant to a large degree upon this habitat.

The recent Kent Harvest Mouse Survey undertaken by Wildwood Trust has clearly demonstrated that these important mammals inhabit the grassy verges of many Kent roads, including numerous 'A' roads. Road verges accounted for 34% of all records for the county. Harvest mice are also known to inhabit rough grassy verges in Essex, Suffolk, Norfolk, Northamptonshire, Oxfordshire, Staffordshire, Devon and the Isle of Wight, and likely, most other counties where they occur.

### What is a harvest mouse?

Harvest mice are our smallest British rodent. Weighing just 6g (the same as a 2p piece), they are so light they can move through long grass and tall herbaceous vegetation with ease. They also have a prehensile tail that can wrap around grass stems like an extra limb and special gripping toes that enable them to spend lot of the time off the ground. They suspend their spherical breeding nests, which are woven from and still attached to the living grass, up to a metre above the surface.

### Status

The harvest mouse is classified in the IUCN red list as near threatened (NT) in England, vulnerable (VU) in Wales and critical (CR) in Scotland. Under Section 41 (England) and Section 42 (Wales) of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act (2006) it was designated as a species of principal importance (SPI) for increasing biodiversity and therefore should be taken into account by any public body to this end.

### Why the timing and degree of mowing is so critical to the harvest mouse

Unlike other small mammal species, the harvest mouse must of necessity start its breeding season late. Most of the others begin breeding in March or April in a nest on, or under the ground, or concealed beneath a board, log or some other object. Before the harvest mouse can weave its aerial nest it must wait for the grass to be sufficiently tall and strong. Realistically, this is around early to mid-June in most years, though it may be sooner in mixed vegetation where the grass has additional support. To make up for the time-deficit the harvest mouse may then continue breeding into the autumn, sometimes as late as December if the weather stays mild. The peak period is August to October which coincides with mowing and trimming associated with the harvesting of crops and frequently the second annual verge mowing by councils. The devolvement of hedge and verge maintenance responsibility to farmers alongside the land that they own means that there is no coordinated timing of this activity. In recent years the overall impression appears to be multiple mowings at random times throughout the year in many places.

### A note to farmers and landowners

Harvest mice are no threat to cereal crops. In addition, modern mechanisation means that it is no longer viable for them to nest within wheat and barley fields (although a few may do so). Instead they prefer well supported grassy margins, either within the field itself or if beside a road, along the adjacent verge. If you take responsibility for the hedge and verge on the road side, as is likely, you can help harvest mice by doing a combined cut as late as possible in the winter. A cut in early spring would remove old dead growth, bramble and young scrub, re-setting the clock so

that fresh herbaceous vegetation can re-grow in time for the harvest mouse's breeding season. This is very similar to what happens already, except for the timing, which is down to individual choice, so long as hedges are cut before March to avoid nesting birds. An autumn cut, for example, may actually remove active breeding nests, a later one would affect shelter and food supply, while later still would mean that harvest mice could find both food sources and cover in the new growth. A cut in February would have the least negative impact on harvest mice and many other species, and would be beneficial overall.

