



MAMMAL NEWS

www.mammal.org.uk

Autumn 2018 • Issue 182



**MAMMAL POPULATION REVIEW • SQUIRRELS IN SUBURBIA • WILD RABBIT POPULATION
BLACK RAT REMOVAL ON THE SHIANTS • CAMERA TRAPS ON FIELD TRIPS
SEAL CITIZEN SCIENCE PROJECT • AN EXTRAORDINARY HARE ENCOUNTER**



Mark Hows

Black death – black rat removal on the Shiant

As of March 2018 the Shiant Islands have been declared free of black rats. This is Mark Hows' personal reminiscence about a trip to see them before their eradication.

After the eradication from Lundy in the early 2000s the Shiant Islands were the last stronghold of the black rat in the UK. Their origins are believed to be from an 18th Century shipwreck and they have lived there ever since in what appeared to be a relatively small but stable population, estimated by the RSPB at approximately peaking at 3,600.

The islands are uninhabited, with only a few visitors each year, so there is no supplementary food apart from that found naturally in the islands. There is a finite amount of food on the islands during the winter, so the rat population, which increases after eating seabird eggs and chicks during the summer, falls back to a low level. This means that the amount of seabird predation is probably constant each summer. However, with dwindling seabird numbers in the northern seas, due to over fishing, pollution and climate change amongst other reasons, it was decided to eliminate black rats from the Shiant. Doing so would offer breeding opportunities to such species as Manx shearwaters and

storm petrels, which struggle to nest on islands with rats present and are indeed absent from the Shiant.

In 2015 the RSPB and SNH, in conjunction with the Nicholson family who own the islands, embarked on a £1 million project to eradicate black rats from the Shiant Islands. Public sympathy for rats is low, so declaring them as a non-native species (despite them being in the UK since medieval times), meant there was little opposition to the project, apart from some animal rights groups.

The decline in black rats in the UK has been attributed to the arrival of brown rats in the 18th century, these are larger and are thought to out-compete them. But, in all of their range, brown rats are also present, so I am not sure we fully understand their decline. Since the eradication of black rats from Lundy, the only major population UK was on the Shiant Isles. Anecdotally there are black rat records from many places and indeed the NBN atlas shows some small localised populations on the British mainland, mainly around some of the docks and ports associated with introductions from cargo. Care should be taken with mis-identification; a possibility as brown rats can often be black.

Black rat or brown rat

Rattus rattus or *Rattus norvegicus*

Although they are named after colours, it is possible to get either colour in each species, however, their behaviour is different. Black rats are natural climbers hence their nickname of "roof rat" whereas brown rats prefer heading underground. The black rats are believed to be more highly dependent on buildings and thus are more vulnerable to poisoning.

It is believed that the black rat has a population of zero in the UK now but it cannot be considered extinct here until an exhaustive survey has been conducted. It is possible that they are isolated to some ports.

Further information about their distribution is in the Mammal Society's Population Review.

Request from the Mammal Society: Please get in touch if you think you have seen a black rat especially in the London/Medway area.

atlas@themammalsociety.org

● In 2015 the RSPB and SNH, in conjunction with the Nicholson family who own the islands, embarked on a £1 million project to eradicate black rats from the Shiant Islands. ●



A rat in the hand it worth two on the loose!

Eradication was being discussed for a few years before the project started, so six intrepid mammal watchers, with permission from the owner, visited the Shiant Islands back in August 2013 to see the black rats before the removal started. This is not an easy process, you have to charter a boat from the Outer Hebrides and, with no facilities on the islands, you have to take all your own camping equipment, food, water etc. With changeable weather conditions and not being sure how long we would need to stay to see the rats, we took enough provisions for three days and nights. Our charter boat "The Enchanted Isle" was a premonition for our destination; the Shiant Islands are a wonderful group of islands and full of birdlife. Puffins in particular were very abundant, as were their predators, we saw a selection of gulls, great skuas and white

tailed eagles during our short stay. But it was the rats we were after and we had with us a selection of about 35 live traps, both large Sherman and small cage traps, along with a diverse selection of bait from raw chicken pieces, chocolate bars and seed to aid us in our quest.

We set up a few bait stations and set the traps in two areas of the island previously reported as having rats present (in what was rather poor weather) and waited for dark. It did not take long for the rats to find our traps and visit the bait stations, despite the pouring rain. We saw several individuals at these stations and trapped a further eight animals overnight. With worsening weather and our goal achieved, our charter collected

us from the island in late morning before a large storm was due to arrive that could have had us marooned on the island for a few days.

Was it right to eradicate them or would brown rat eradication on Rum be more beneficial?

Personally I think it is a shame to lose them from the UK, particularly as they were contained on a small group of islands. With limited food the population was unlikely to grow, but in the larger picture of seabird decline and the black rat being a common species globally, I can see why they were removed.

Now virtually extinct in the UK, if you want to see black rats you need to venture a little further afield, your best bet being Sark in the Channel Islands.

