

What to Know when Exploring Outdoors

The hazel dormouse



In Hello Trees books, a hazel dormouse guides you through the stories of trees through the seasons. Hello Trees books make outdoor exploring a walk in the park. Find out more about them at www.hellotrees.co.uk.



There is no chance you will see a hazel dormouse unless you go to a special event at a nature reserve, but you might find evidence of where they have been and what they have eaten so have a magnifying glass handy when you go exploring outdoors, especially near a hazel hedge.



A hazel dormouse has golden-brown fur, little pointed ears, black eyes, extremely long whiskers, some darker hairs on its forehead and back, paler hairs on its tummy and the underneath of its hairy tail, and a little white tuft at the end of its tail. A dormouse is about the size and weight of an egg if you don't count its tail. Its tail is thin and hairy and as long as its body.



dormouse asleep

In winter, the hazel dormouse hibernates, sleeping deeply in a warm nest among the roots of trees or in the earth under a hedge. See how it wraps its tail right round over its head and brings its feet up on to its tummy. Its body temperature and heart rate are lowered and it would feel cold to the touch. It remains utterly inactive.

In spring, the hazel dormouse wakes but waits until dark to look for food. It likes to eat flower buds, flowers, seeds and small insects. It also makes a new nest, a 'resting nest', of honey-suckle bark, grass and fresh leaves. This nest is about the size of a tennis ball and is off the ground well hidden in the thickest part of a hedge. It will climb into the nest, curl up and sleep during daylight hours and when it is tired during the night.



Hazel dormouse summer nest

In summer, if a female dormouse has mated with a male, she needs a bigger nest, this time about the size of a grapefruit.

She may give birth to 4 or 5 baby dormice. Now that the weather is warm, there are more insects to eat. Insects are good food for growing babies.

In autumn there are lots of berries and nuts for the dormouse to eat. This sort of food helps to fatten the dormouse up to keep itself going through the winter. It also stores nuts so that if it wakes in the winter it can find something to eat quickly and easily and then go back to sleep.



Hazel dormouse foraging for food in autumn

Do



See if you can find some hazelnuts that have holes in – they will probably be on the floor near a hazel hedge or tree.



Hazel nuts eaten by a dormouse

By examining the hole made in a hazel nut, it is possible to tell whether it is a dormouse that has eaten it. A dormouse makes a neat circular cut, smooth to the inside of the opening and with tiny radiating teeth marks on the outside.

Swivel ankles and long feet with sticky pads underneath help dormice twist and turn and balance along tiny twigs to reach hazel nuts and blackberries which are their favourite food.

To avoid going down on to the ground, dormice will go a very long way round. They climb along branches and even up into the canopy of tall trees.



Question

Do you think this is to keep them out of danger or because their feet feel more comfortable on branches than on soil and stones?

Danger comes from being eaten by weasels, stoats, foxes or badgers, and it could also come from being trodden on by farm animals, deer or humans.

! It is against the law to deliberately hurt dormice or reduce their chances of surviving or breeding.

The Woodland Trust offers a 'dormouse pack'.

<http://www.naturedetectives.org.uk/download/dormouse.htm>

