

# Mammals of Norfolk



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Species commentaries based on original text by Martin Perrow, *Norfolk Mammal Report 1995*,  
with updated information from subsequent annual reports.

## Red Squirrel

*Sciurus vulgaris*

Common in both deciduous and coniferous woodland in Norfolk until the late 1970s, this species has suffered a catastrophic decline. Its last strongholds were in the Thetford Forest area, but it is now considered unlikely that any self-sustaining population survives. Any individuals seen are likely to be introductions, or mistaken identification of Grey Squirrel which can sometimes appear to have reddish fur, as for instance in the photograph below.



Brian Macfarlane



Tony Howes

## Grey Squirrel

*Sciurus carolinensis*

Introduced from the USA at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, subsequently spreading throughout lowland Britain, becoming widespread across Norfolk in the last 20-30 years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is frequently seen in all forms of woodland and is a regular garden visitor, especially where there are bird feeders. It is particularly conspicuous in autumn when burying nuts on the ground, and is a common road casualty at this time of year.



## Bank Vole

*Myodes glareolus*

Abundant in all forms of woodland, mature deciduous hedgerows and large gardens where at least some ground cover is available. Less common in grasslands and wetlands. It is a common victim of domestic cats and may be the dominant species in Tawny Owl pellets. Food caches of nuts and berries may be found in burrows. Note the reddish-brown pelage, rounded muzzle, medium-sized ears and short tail.



## Field Vole

*Microtus agrestis*

May be abundant (>100/Ha) in rank unmanaged grassland, grassy field margins and roadside verges. It is more common in grassy wetlands than Bank Vole from which it may be distinguished by its greyer fur and shorter tail. It is a common victim of rural domestic cats and the preferred prey item of virtually all owl species and Kestrel.



## Water Vole

*Arvicola terrestris*

Declining nationally. Most Norfolk records come from the east of the county, with concentrations around Norwich and the Broads. It prefers dense emergent vegetation alongside rivers and dykes, but also around still waters where its main predator, Mink, is less likely to be found. It can be relatively easy to see, particularly when swimming, and is often heard diving into water. Its burrows are at water level, and piles of green droppings on the bank or on tree stumps also betray its presence.

## Harvest Mouse

*Micromys minutus*

Widely but patchily distributed in long grassland throughout the county. It also utilises hedgerows, roadside verges, waste ground, overgrown gardens and arable crops, particularly wheat. Wetland habitats include reed and sedge beds where there can be densities of >50/Ha in autumn. Rarely seen, its characteristic spherical breeding nests are often the best indication of its presence. It can be a victim of cats and is occasionally found in Barn Owl pellets.



Alan Dixon

## Wood Mouse

*Apodemus sylvaticus*

Abundant, though never reaching the density of voles or other mouse species, even in its preferred woodland habitat. It occurs almost ubiquitously even in habitats not favoured by other small mammals including arable fields, beaches and sand dunes. It is only absent in urban areas or wetlands with a very high water table. Food caches of nuts and berries may be found in burrows and old bird nests. Note the large rounded ears, large eyes, pointed muzzle, whitish underparts and long tail.



Hans Watson



## Yellow-necked Mouse

*Apodemus flavicollis*

There are a scattering of records for this species across the county, with a bias towards South Norfolk. It is known from the Wheatfen reserve at Surlingham and the UEA campus in Norwich. Its principal habitat is mature deciduous woodland, though it may also be encountered in outbuildings, especially in winter. Note the large size, and white underparts with full yellow chest collar.

## House Mouse

*Mus domesticus*



Can be abundant around houses, factories and farms, but is rarely encountered away from human habitation. Disturbed animals scuttle at high speed, whereas Wood Mouse bounces with frequent changes of direction. It is greyer than Wood Mouse, with less prominent eyes and ears. It has a characteristic mousey smell.

## Common Rat

*Rattus norvegicus*



A commensal in houses, factories and farms, this species may also occur in waste land, arable land, especially around root crops, and along coastlines and river banks. It regularly scavenges under garden bird feeders. It is often seen at night along urban and rural roads, and is a frequent road casualty. Young individuals are taken by some cats. Readily identified by its large size.



Tony Howes

## Rabbit

*Oryctolagus cuniculus*

A very common, long standing introduction on arable land and grassland, especially in areas with light soils. It is frequently seen in groups around colonial burrow systems especially in late evening. Even when not seen, the characteristic droppings, scrapes and burrows betray its presence. Individuals with myxomatosis are often conspicuous by day.

## Brown Hare

*Lepus europaeus*

It is usually associated with open country including arable land, although it may be encountered relatively frequently in woodland. It is most likely to be seen in open country in early Spring as males follow females, leading to male-male chasing and biting, and male-female 'boxing'. East Anglia including Norfolk, is a national stronghold for the species.



Brown Hare in snow - Tony Howes



Tont Howes

## Hedgehog

*Erinaceus europaeus*

Formerly very common in a variety of habitats, including gardens, where its presence may be given away at night by its noisy rustling and snuffling foraging activity. The distinctive shiny black droppings contain beetle carapaces and pieces of other invertebrates. Nationally, population numbers are estimated to have declined by as much as 45% over the last 25 years.

## Mole

*Talpa europaea*

Very common in all types of grassland and woodland, where its presence is all too readily confirmed by the characteristic 'hills' of earth excavated from its underground runs and burrows. There are occasional records of live individuals above ground, particularly in late summer when the young are dispersing.



Tony Howes



## Common Shrew

*Sorex araneus*

Shrews are carnivorous and may be distinguished from mice and voles by their long pointed snouts. Common Shrew is abundant in grassland, woodland and hedgerows of all types. It is a common victim of the domestic cat but is rarely eaten by them. Note the paler fur on the flanks which helps to distinguish it from Pygmy Shrew.



## Pygmy Shrew

*Sorex minutes*

Typically far less abundant than Common Shrew. Favoured habitats appear to be non-wooded wetlands as well as grassland. When found dead, it can be distinguished from Common Shrew by its small size and its relatively uniform brown colour which fades indistinctly into paler belly fur. The long hairy tail is thickened after a narrow base.



## Water Shrew

*Neomys fodiens*

Although generally sighted near rivers, streams, ponds, ditches, reed beds and other boggy areas, it can also be found in other habitats, and can fall victim to domestic cats. It is normally black with a white belly (which is somewhat restricted in the specimen illustrated). It also occurs in a dark brown form with dusky underside. There is a keel of bristly hairs on the underside of the tail and a hairy fringe on the hind toes.



Pete Taylor

## Pipistrelle

*Pipistrellus pipistrellus* / *Pipistrellus pygmaeus*

Pipistrelles are by far and away the most common species of bat to be found in Norfolk. They are small species (wingspan 22cms), regularly seen at dusk hawking insects at rooftop height in both town and country. At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Pipistrelles were split into two species based on the frequency of their echo-location calls: the Common Pipistrelle (45KHz) and the Soprano Pipistrelle (55KHz). Both appear to be widespread across the county, flying from March to October or November, and hibernating over winter as do all bats.



Hanging  
head downward

Mike Ottley

## Brown Long-eared Bat

*Plecotus auritus* Recorded from 817 tetrads in 21<sup>st</sup> century

This is a widely distributed woodland species with a slow fluttering flight, frequently hovering around trees, indicating that it takes the bulk of its prey from the foliage, rather than capturing it in open flight. Wingspan 25cms..

## Noctule

*Nyctalus noctula*

*Recorded from 659 tetrads in 21<sup>st</sup> century.*

Noctule is the largest British bat with a wingspan up to 36cms. It has a preference for pastoral and wetland habitats where it can be seen flying high at dusk and sometimes even during the day. It frequently performs characteristic dipping movements as it diverts from its flight path to catch prey.

## Daubenton's Bat

*Myotis daubentonii*

*Recorded from 510 tetrads in 21<sup>st</sup> century.*

This bat can often be seen feeding over water bodies, flying steadily a few centimetres above the surface and grabbing prey items resting on it. However, this behaviour is not unique to Daubenton's Bat so does not give proof of identity. It is widespread across the county and in winter is frequently found in underground hibernation sites such as chalk caves or ice houses. Wingspan 25cms.

### Other bat species recorded in Norfolk in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are:

**Natterer's** (588 tetrads),

**Barbastelle** (573 tetrads),

**Serotine** (557 tetrads)

**Nathusius' Pipistrelle** (317 tetrads),

**Leisler's Bat** (165 tetrads),

**Whiskered Bat / Brandt's Bat** (107 tetrads combined – these species are difficult to separate acoustically).

**Particoloured Bat** (Vagrant, last recorded 2018).



Hans Watson

## Badger

*Meles meles*

Becoming increasingly common with up to 400 setts known in the county, although only a small proportion of these may be active at any one time. Commonest sites are in deciduous woodland, sand pits and disused railway banks, where the distinctive spoil heaps with 3-10 entrances can be prominent features.

## Fox

*Vulpes vulpes*

Very common in virtually all habitats including the urban environment. The mating season is from December to February when smell and nocturnal screaming can reveal its presence. Cubs and family groups are most frequently sighted in May.



Badger sett – David Richmond



Brian Macfarlane

## Otter

*Lutra lutra*

Formerly common, this species underwent a dramatic decline in the mid to late 20<sup>th</sup> century but is now recovering following reintroductions by the Otter Trust. It is rarely seen, except by anglers who are likely to be out at dawn or dusk, but its presence is betrayed by its characteristic spraints which may be deposited under bridges or on prominent stones along its regular tracks. Although most common in the Brecks and the Broads it could probably be encountered along any of Norfolk's river systems.

## American Mink

*Mustela vison*

An escapee from commercial fur farms from the 1930s onwards, it has penetrated the aquatic habitats of the Broads and the Brecks, where it is a serious predator of the native Water Vole. The illustration shows one of seven trapped within a 36-hour period in July 2001 at a single site at Ditchingham in the Waveney valley. The full year total of 24 for that site indicates the level of infestation which can occur.



Dorothy Cheyne



## Stoat

*Mustela erminea*

Widespread and common across Norfolk being found in virtually any habitat. Its seemingly endearing nature and fascinating behaviour mask its true character as a vicious killer of rabbits, small mammals and birds, and as a predator of birds' nests. Its bounding gait is reminiscent of a squirrel on the ground. Look for the black tip to its long tail to distinguish it from Weasel.



## Weasel

*Mustela nivalis*

Although it may be found in any habitat, it has a closer association with cover than Stoat. This is partly linked to the availability of small mammal prey and its own vulnerability to predation. Consequently it is seen less frequently than Stoat, and then only as a fleeting glimpse as the animal crosses a road or woodland ride. Although generally smaller than Stoat, the size ranges can overlap. Look for the shorter tail with no black tip.



Moss Taylor

## Polecat

*Mustela putorius*

In line with its national range expansion, the Polecat appears to have spread into and across Norfolk during the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. First reports were from the MOD rifle range in Thetford Forest in 2010/11 since when it has spread across the county so that by 2019 it had been recorded from 131 tetrads (2x2km grid squares)

The separation of true Polecat from Polecat-Ferret hybrids is difficult. The key field characteristics for the true Polecat are:

- Dark fur joining the nose to the mask
- Pale cheek patches contrasting with dark mask
- No scattered white guard hairs over the body
- No pale throat patch (or if present less than 50mm)
- Dark fur on paws.

Most records have been road casualties, but interesting live records include one caught in a live trap at South Lopham Fen (2014), a juvenile found asleep with two half eaten bantams in a hen house at Kerdiston (2016), six young in a garden at Colton (2017) and the one illustrated at Weybourne Camp hunting rabbits (2017).

## Ferret

*Mustela furo*

The domesticated form of Polecat used to capture rabbits. Individuals seen in the wild could represent escapes or small feral populations (*not illustrated*).



Hans Watson

## Common (Harbour) Seal

*Phoca vitulina*

Common Seal can be encountered all around the Norfolk coast with regular records from Lynn Point to Salthouse in the north, and from Walcott to Winterton in the east. There are occasional records of disoriented individuals along the Fenland rivers or along the River Yare. The young are born in June or July and can swim almost from birth.

Look for the rounded head with distinct muzzle to distinguish this species from Grey Seal.

## Grey Seal

*Halichoerus grypus*

Grey Seals have increased in numbers around the Norfolk coast during the 21<sup>st</sup> century. They can be seen hauled out onto sandy beaches to give birth in November or December. The pups' creamy white fur is shed after two to three weeks, but it may be another two months before they are ready to go to sea.

Grey Seal can be separated from Common Seal by its flatter head profile.



Tony Howes

# Red Deer

*Cervus elaphus*

The status of Red Deer in Norfolk is confused by historic introductions to sporting estates. It is patchily distributed across Norfolk with concentrations in three main areas: central North Norfolk, the Broads and Thetford Forest. There are clear peaks in monthly observations, one in March-April prior to the period when hinds give birth; and the second in October-November during the rut, when roaring stags can be heard over considerable distances. It is typically a woodland animal, but groups of occasionally up to 40 individuals can be seen grazing on arable land at dusk. The similar **Sika Deer** *Cervus nippon* is occasionally reported from deer parks in the county, but its historical distribution and status in Norfolk remains unclear.



*Red Deer - David Richmond*



Tony Howes

## Fallow Deer

*Dama dama*

Originally native but became extinct and was reintroduced in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. The Norfolk population almost certainly originates from park escapes. The main groups are found in the extensive woodlands in West Norfolk, with small numbers in Thetford Forest and the woodland areas to the north-west of Norwich. There are domesticated herds at Houghton and Holkham. Look for the broad-bladed (palmate) antlers of the stags.



Alan Dixon

## Roe Deer

*Capreolus capreolus*

A native species widely distributed in Norfolk. It occurs in a wide range of woodland habitats, including small stands of trees, scrub, wet woodland and heath. It can also be seen crossing arable land or grazing at dusk. Look for the round, white rump patch, and short antlers in the stag.



Tony Howes

Tony Howes

## Reeve's Muntjac

*Muntiacus reevesi*

A non-native species introduced to Woburn Abbey in Bedfordshire in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Feral populations are now established in woodland across Norfolk. It prefers woods with a dense understorey such as bramble, but will also frequent small stands of trees and may even be encountered in suburban gardens. Most frequently seen along woodland rides at dusk or on verges alongside even busy roads. Look for the long tail, often held erect when running, short 'prong' antlers and black facial markings.

## Chinese Water Deer

*Hydropotes inermis*

Another escape from captivity, first recorded in Norfolk in 1968. It is now widespread and seemingly common throughout its favoured wetland habitat in the Broads, and has begun to spread outwards with recorded sightings across central Norfolk and even from the extreme north west of the county. It can be distinguished from Muntjac by its short tail, large ears and lack of antlers or black facial markings. The male possesses long upper canines which project from the mouth.



Tony Howes

# Harbour Porpoise

*Phocoena phocoena*

This is the most likely species of cetacean to be seen off the Norfolk coast. It can be recognised at sea by the small triangular fin on its arched back, as it partly breaks the waves, never breaching clear of the surface. Occasionally individuals are washed up dead on the beaches, in which case additional identification features are the small size (up to 1.8m) and rounded head without the prominent 'beak' of dolphin species.



David Richmond

There are occasional reports of other whale or dolphin species off the Norfolk coast, or of strandings of dead individuals on the beaches. The most recent 21<sup>st</sup> century sightings are listed below:

Minke Whale	2022 – sighted at sea off North Norfolk coast in September and October
Long-finned Pilot Whale	2021 – Single off Cromer in July.
Orca	2021 – a distant sighting off Walcott in October
White-beaked Dolphin	2021 – bow riding 14.5km off Happisburgh in April.
Bottlenose Dolphin	2020 – 3 filmed bow-riding a fishing boat off Sheringham.
Common Dolphin	2020 – passed through Norfolk waters into River Nene in August.
Northern Bottlenose Whale	2020 – 3 off Weybourne in August.
Sowerby's Beaked Whale	2020 – two off Brancaster Harbour in August.
Humpback Whale	2019 – Cley (November) – continuing a sequence going back to 2013
Risso's Dolphin	2018 – found dead on Gt Yarmouth beach in May ( <i>first county record</i> ).
Fin Whale	2018 – a young animal in the Gt Ouse in June, subsequently found dead.
Sperm Whale	2016 – 2 or 3 offshore at Hunstanton in Feb when others stranded.
Atlantic White-sided Dolphin	2006 – washed ashore at Blakeney.
Cuvier's Beaked Whale	2002 – found dead on north-east coast.

**For more information please see the species guide to Cetaceans of Norfolk on the Society website.**



## Checklist of Norfolk Mammals

Print out this page to record your sightings of Norfolk Mammals.

Species	Where	When
Red Squirrel		
Grey Squirrel		
Bank Vole		
Field Vole		
Water Vole		
Harvest mouse		
Wood Mouse		
Yellow-necked Mouse		
House Mouse		
Common Rat		
Rabbit		
Brown Hare		
Rabbit		
Mole		
Common Shrew		
Pigmy Shrew		
Water Shrew		

Species	Where	When
Pippistrelle		
Long-eared Bat		
Noctule		
Fox		
Badger		
Otter		
Stoat		
Weasel		
Polecat		
Common Seal		
Grey seal		
Red Deer		
Fallow Deer		
Roe Deer		
Reeve's Muntjac		
Chinese Water Deer		
Harbour Porpoise		

**Records of mammals seen in Norfolk should be sent to Norfolk Biodiversity Information Service using the recording spreadsheet found on the website [www.nbis.org.uk](http://www.nbis.org.uk)**

**The most important pieces of information to include in any mammal record are:**

- **Species name**
- **Site name**
- **Grid reference**
- **Date**
- **Number of individuals**
- **Type of record (*eg sighting, found dead, killed by cat, traffic casualty, field sign*)**
- **Observer contact details**