

## NORTHUMBERLAND MAMMALS

By E. A. R. ENNION

There is little in Tyneside to attract a naturalist in search of mammals however much it may appeal to students of the Industrial North. The "denes", steep thickly-wooded clefts enclosing the streams, right up to the outskirts of Newcastle itself, still harbour a few red squirrels: the grey is absent. It has crossed the Wear into County Durham from liberation areas in Yorkshire but so far it has failed to cross the Tyne. Tyneside with its busy shipyards and its grimy ring of coalmines is, however, only one small corner of Northumberland. It is true that opencast operations have extended the black area: they certainly make a sorry mess of the countryside. But away beyond all this in a vast sector between north and west stretches the real Northumberland, the fifth largest county in England, a land of hills and moors, woods and farms, still much as it was before the industrial ravaging of Tyneside.

Among the *Insectivores* there is no shortage of moles: indeed the wide pastures of the south-west of the county and the coastal plain, which only recently and then but here and there have felt the plough, suit the "little gentleman in black velvet" very well. He invades the upland sheepwalks too, extending well into the hills along the pockets of greensward beside the burns, the favourite places for the ring-ouzel, to hunt for worms. He is seldom found in the peaty soil of the bogs and moors, where worms are few, for moles and shrews need more than their own weight of worm or insect meat each day and cannot afford to stay where they are not assured of adequate supplies. Common, pigmy and water shrews occur plentifully; and hedgehogs too, even among the dry marrams of the coastal dunes, where they shelter in rabbit-holes and eat their fill of the multitudes of banded snails with which the dunes abound. But Northumberland seems to be too far north to hold many bats. The little pipistrelle is common enough, and the long-eared bat in the woods; and the county lies well within the range of the whiskered bat, though I have not seen it here myself. I have seen noctules and, flitting slowly close to the surface along quiet shaded reaches of the River Aln in Alnwick Park, Daubenton's bat. No others: but here as elsewhere no record does not necessarily mean their absence. Few people, naturalists included, are able to identify bats in the field.

*The Carnivore* of Northumberland is undoubtedly the fox.

Foxes I see frequently as I go about : an old red dog fox lolloping across a meadow ; a vixen trotting daintily along the beach with a couple of rabbits in her mouth, breakfast for her cubs ; a half-grown cub having a wonderful game one early morning, tossing and capering round with the part-eaten carcass of an old brown hen—one of our own, as I discovered afterwards ! Badgers, unobtrusive as ever, are by no means uncommon and the same may be said of the otter. Not long since, on a big loch close to the Scottish border, we watched a fine old otter on a winter morning, floating lazily well out from the shore. He was curling and rolling, casing himself over towards a scattered flock of wigeon. He dived and, after what seemed minutes, caused panic among the nearest birds when he came up. They were obviously wary—very much on the *qui vive*—and, whether in play or in earnest, his tactics didn't look like earning him a dinner : though he may well have had a few wigeon suppers on dark nights. Weasels, I feel sure, are less common than in the south, although they are widespread : I saw one last summer in a bilberry patch within hail of the top of Cheviot, at about 2,600 ft. But there are plenty of stoats. We see them playing hide-and-seek with each other in and out of the stone walls or king-of-the-castle on a gate. Rabbit-trapping in Northumberland is not conducted on the vast scale practised in the West where, among other unhappy consequences, it has led to the virtual extermination of the stoat. We now await the reactions of the stoat—elsewhere—to the virtual extermination of the rabbit ! We have neither polecats nor martens. And there are certainly no wild cats.

The blue hare with its woolly coat, short ears and face, is found sparingly on the highest ground, perhaps only on the two main tops of the Cheviots ; and, in all probability, these hares derive from some imported stock. It seems that of the original race (*Lepus timidus anglicus* Hinton), long since extinct, two lines survive, the Irish and the Scottish Blue or Mountain Hares respectively. The brown hare, which entered Britain later from the Continent (but too late to colonize Ireland, where it was introduced), is by far the commoner animal in Northumberland. It is especially common on the coastal plain, where indeed, in autumn, the brown hares of the higher lands appear to congregate. They eat a good deal of the " winter keep " provided for the sheep and so their numbers have to be reduced.

It is not exceptional on a combined farmers' and keepers' day for up to three hundred of them to be shot—the sort of bag numbers I have known hitherto only on the light land to the

west of Newmarket Heath. This is no time to express opinions on the population of the rabbit, with myxomatosis spreading everywhere. It is perhaps true that there are—or *were*—more rabbits per acre living in the dunes along the coast, that run from, say, twenty miles north of the mouth of the Tyne almost uninterruptedly to the Tweed at Berwick, than anywhere else in the county: we have yet to measure the effects of the relaxation of their “grazing pressure” in the growth of scrub, the choking of footpaths, the loss of fine sward and other changes that are bound to follow; quite apart from what the predators that lived on them are going to eat.

Of the small rodents the field- (or short-tailed) vole, the bank-vole and the water-vole are all very common. Northumberland is a county of big fields and wide stretches of moorland: it has relatively few woods, thickets and hedgerows, except in the west; and hedgerows over much of it are replaced by stone walls. One might expect then that the field- would outnumber the bank-voles: the water-vole is always restricted to the margins of rivers and streams. This is borne out by experience, the field-vole often being found where one would expect to find a bank-vole, and by evidence collected from those rodent connoisseurs, the owls: large numbers of their “pellets” have been sought and analysed and only in those of the long-eared, who loves fir plantations, do you find many skulls of the bank-vole. But you find a lot of wood-mice, the long-tailed field-mouse, *Apodemus*: it is not confined by any means to woodland. In Northumberland like everywhere else it is as much at home in scrub, waste corners, arable fields and gardens. It often comes into houses. One late autumn we caught over thirty in as many days in a downstairs bedroom, not one of them being of de Winton’s yellow-necked form although this is known to occur in the county. The harvest-mouse is not found so far north. House-mice and rats are legion. Although it must be present I have not yet seen a dormouse. Red squirrels are fairly plentiful in suitable districts where there is enough old timber: they do not take kindly to new plantations, nor to the new state forests, at least until the trees are old enough to furnish plenty of fir cones. Their distribution was reviewed recently in the *Transactions of the Northumberland, Durham and Newcastle-on-Tyne Natural History Society*.

There is no “deer forest” in the Scottish sense and it is safe to say that no native red deer now exists in Northumberland: the nearest wild herd lives in the Lake District. Nevertheless red deer appear—I saw a hind myself one morning crossing one

of the lower slopes of Cheviot—and they must be escapes from parks or wanderers from “reservoirs of refugees” established in some of the wild newly-afforested areas: one such “reservoir” exists in County Durham. Much the same story holds for the fallow deer, except that they are far more numerous, and that small herds must exist in nearly all extensive woodland areas. The fallow deer, of course, was never indigenous to Britain: it was imported long, long ago from its native home along the northern shore of the Mediterranean. It is very possible that roe deer of genuine wild ancestry still persist in Northumberland and the Lake district of Westmoreland. Otherwise the only indigenous roe remain in Scotland. Elsewhere (including probably the newer plantations in Northumberland) the roe is derived from stock turned down intentionally. Roe live in the woods and feed mainly at night or very early in the morning: hence, though they may be present in far larger numbers (though not in *herds*, for roe keep in family parties) they are less often seen by casual observers than fallow or red deer. As nimble if not as wild as a deer is the Cheviot sheep, a small, close-horned, whitefaced breed with a long fine fleece. It has largely vanished from the moors and mountain pastures of its birthplace. It has been replaced, on the lower ground, by various cross-breeds, the commonest being that big leggy brute with a daft expression and a Roman countenance that rejoices in the name of Border-Leicester: on the high ground by the far more attractive Scottish Blackface. A transfer seems to have been made in this case: I saw few Blackfaces but far and away more Cheviots than I’ve ever seen south of the Border, on a visit not long since to Wester Ross.

On the Farne Islands off the north Northumbrian coast there is a big colony of grey seals, some five-hundred beasts all told—the only breeding-station on the North Sea coast. They are big animals, far larger than the common or harbour seal, and a full-grown bull must weigh as much if not more than a cart-horse. A few rogues seem to wander up to the mouth of the Tweed, where they make themselves most unpopular with those engaged in the salmon fisheries; but the great majority, at least of the adults, stay round the islands and catch “worthless” fish like lump-suckers. Many young seals, on the other hand, wander far afield, beginning their travels at a very early age: one young pup, ringed on the islands, was recovered three weeks afterwards in Norway. Porpoises are often seen and other members of the “small whale” group occasionally get stranded. Once in the summer of 1954 the long triangular fin of a bull killer whale,

with three smaller companions, was seen cruising between the islands and the shore.

Perhaps the most famous mammals of Northumberland are the wild white cattle of Chillingham Park. Their origin is remote and it is known that no extraneous blood has been introduced at least for a very long while. Careful records have been kept and the number of beasts in the herd has varied considerably from time to time: it is now dangerously low, owing to a series of recent accidents. A *Chillingham Cattle Society* has been launched by the owner, Lord Tankerville, to promote their welfare and interests. One other famous beast—a cow—is possibly Northumbrian. The rhyme runs, if I remember aright:

*Four and twenty tailors tried to catch a snail,  
The best man amongst them daresn't touch her tail,  
For she put out her horns like a little Kylow cow—  
Run, tailors, Run! Or she'll have you all 'ere now.*

Chillingham Park lies on the Kylow Hills; Chillingham's "mother village", Chatton, had a tailoring tradition—two Northumbrian gentlemen, meeting à la Livingstone in exile, are reputed to have recognized each other by the Chatton cut of their clothes—and Chillingham cattle have the reputation of being pretty handy with their horns—I wonder!

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