MAMMAL NEWS

THE OXFORD FOX DIET

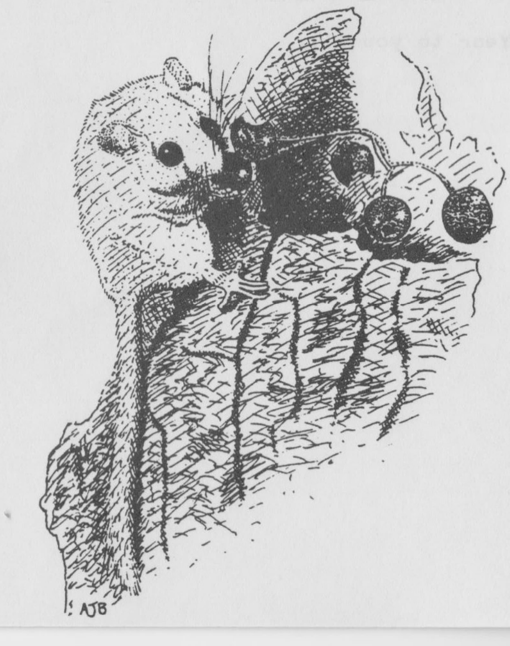
In a recent study, the diet of the red fox (*Vulpes vulpes*) in the city of Oxford was investigated. Eighty-one types of food were found, including scavenged items, mammals, birds, fruits and invertebrates. The diet showed seasonal and monthly variations. Some items were taken in proportion to their availability while others appeared not to be.

Ref: Doncaster, C.P.; Dickman, C.R. and Macdonald, D.W. Mamm. 71 (2) 1990

WOODLAND FIT FOR DORMICE?

In a recent article, Bright and Morris described dormouse (*Muscardinus avellanarius*) habitat requirements in relation to woodland management. They found that the most suitable woods had an unshaded understorey with a high species diversity. Coppice-with-standards mangement, if appropriately conducted, maintains the correct conditions. The authors believe that the decline of coppicing may have contributed significantly to the present scarcity of dormice in Britain.

Ref: Bright P.W. and Morris,P.A. Biological Conservation 54 (1990)



MERLIN PREYING ON LONG-EARED BAT

In yet another example of raptors feeding on bats (see Imprint nos. 14 and 15) a long-eared bat (*Plecotus auritus*) was recorded as a prey item for a merlin (*Falco columbarius*) in Northumberland.

Ref: Birds in Northumberland 1988

MARINE RESEARCH PACKAGE

The Junior Environment Minister, David Heathcoat-Amory, announced last year the sum of £250,000 to be spent on research into the biology of dolphins, porpoises and seabirds. The project, part of the Department of the Environment's North Sea research programme, will include coordination of cetacean sighting and stranding records and post mortem analysis of small cetaceans.

Ref: Habitat 26 (8) 1990.

SEAL VIRUS UPDATE

The epizootic of 1988, in which more than 17,000 European harbour seals (*Phoca vitulina*) died, received widespread media attention. Mass mortalities of pinnipeds are well documented and there are records of four similar seal plagues around Britain within the last 200 years. The causative agent in this latest outbreak has been identified as a morbillivirus, now called phocine distemper virus (PDV). However, the origin of the virus and the factors affecting its epizootiology remain contoversial.

It has been suggested that the virus could have been spread by invading harp seals (*Phoca groenlandica*) or ringed seals (*Phoca hispida*). Serological evidence from Greenland populations have shown that both harbour the virus. However, animals invading the North Sea in 1987 and 1988 came from the Barents Sea, and it is not known whether PDV is present in this population.

A number of environmental factors have been postulated as influences on the epizootic. Immune suppression by PCB's and other pollutants may have contributed to PDV pathology. Many of the seal deaths were due to secondary bacterial infections rather than to the direct effects of the viral disease. Research into this area is complicated by the fact that the virus itself causes immunosuppression.

Temperature could also have affected the course of the epizootic. Lavigne and Schmitz have linked unseasonably warm temperatures to the occurrence of six major pinniped mass mortalities, including that of 1988. Temperature may