

# *Account of Purley on Thames*

## Wild Mammals

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### *Definition*

The distinguishing characteristics of a mammal are the presence of hair and of milk secreting glands. Typically they are warm blooded vertebrates with four legs and a well developed brain. They belong to the Phylum "Chordata", Sub-Phylum "Vertebrata" and form the Class "Mammalia"

### *Groupings*

Only five orders of mammals live in the wild in Purley although some more exotic species have been sighted. These are:-

- Ungulates (deer, pigs, ruminants etc)
- Cheiroptera (bats)
- Insectivores (Hedgehogs etc)
- Carnivores (foxes etc)
- Rodents (mice etc)

They will be covered under those headings.

### *Ungulates*

In Victorian times the Ungulates formed a single order'; nowadays they are split into two Orders distinguished by the number of toes. Thus there is the Order "Artiodactyla" or Cloven hoof animals and the order "Perissodactyla" or odd toed animals. The former includes deer, sheep and pigs, the latter horses.

While there are a number of such creatures in Purley, most are on farms. Deer have been seen occasionally, usually the small Roe Deer or the Munkjack. Sightings have usually been around Sulham Woods but they have ventured closer to the river on occasions.

### *Cheiroptera*

This Order comprises the bats and are characterised by the ability to fly and navigate in the dark by sonar techniques. They are very common all over Purley although not very easy to study as they tend to come out only after dark and while their presence is easily detected you never get a chance to have a good look at them. All the species are protected by law.

There are four species which are relatively common:-

- Greater Horse Shoe Bat
- Long Eared Bat
- Barbastelle
- Daubenton's Bat

and there are several other species which may appear from time to time.

They live in any convenient, dry shelter and are always grateful to man for providing them with so much shelter in the area. They will live in roof spaces of houses, behind garden sheds, in barns and undoubtedly there are plenty in the church. On summer evenings they provide a dazzling display of

flying and do a great deal of good in eating insects.

### *Insectivores*

There are four species which are to be seen in Purley:-

- Hedgehog
- Mole
- Common shrew
- Water shrew

**Hedgehogs** used to be very common but are less so now. They often will stake out a garden as their territory. Many people in the village put out bread and milk for them (even though this is not part of their diet and can cause them harm) and even invite them into their homes. We have had them in our house several times but they are not to be recommended as most of them are flea-ridden. They feed mainly on insects and grubs and are good at keeping pests at bay. They tend to be caught out on the main roads however and flattened hedgehog used to be a very common sight.

**Moles** are also very common, especially somewhat away from the Thames where they can often suffer from occasional flooding. This is of course the 'Wind in the Willows' country and the banks of the Thames in the Purley -Pangbourne area formed the setting for this Kenneth Graham book and its hero 'Mole'. They are however regarded as a real pest as they burrow under lawns, causing ridges and throwing up heaps of spoil. Some of their underground runs are very ancient, probably having being in regular use for hundreds of years.

**Shrews** are comparatively rare. There are no specific records of sightings in Purley but it is likely that a few are around. The water variety is usually found only in running ditches in the water meadows and the Westbury Brook is a likely habitat for them.

### **Carnivores**

Several species of carnivores are native to the area:-

- Fox
- Polecat
- Stoat
- Weasel
- Badger
- Otter

**Foxes** are relatively common although not often seen. There have been several records of earths in the village, including ones in the back gardens of houses on Long Lane. Many locals who have kept chickens in their garden have discovered how common they are and how difficult they are to keep out. They tend to hunt at night and generally feed on smaller animals and wild birds.

It is very difficult to distinguish a **polecat** from escaped ferrets. They were at one time relatively common in the area, inhabiting the great woods, but as these have now all but disappeared so have the polecats.

**Stoats** are again relatively common, inhabiting the hedgerows, particularly close to the Thames and where there are cornfields. They feed on small mammals and birds, very like foxes and some quite large specimens have been caught.

**Weasels** are much rarer and there are no specific records of them in Purley.

There are many **badgers** about, especially in the area of Sulham Woods, and in the area of Purley Park near the railway. Being nocturnal they are seen only very rarely, but they leave quite a few traces behind. They share many of the feeding habits of the foxes although are quite likely to grub up

people's gardens in their search for food.

**Otters** were once very common on the banks of the Thames. They all but disappeared but are now making a comeback. They feed mainly on fish and eels although they are quite partial to frogs.

## *Rodents*

The local rodents are:-

- Brown squirrel
- Grey squirrel
- Dormouse
- Harvest mouse
- Long tailed field mouse
- House mouse
- Brown rat
- Field vole
- Bank vole
- Water vole
- Common Hare
- Rabbit

The **brown squirrel** has all but disappeared from the scene.

Once the only British squirrel they have now been almost completely superseded by the **grey squirrel** which was introduced from North America. They are very agile creatures and very common all over Purley.

They are a great source of pleasure to many people who enjoy their antics, especially around the autumn when they can be seen picking nuts off trees and then scampering away to hide them for the winter.

The **dormouse** is a somewhat retiring creature. They nest in hedgerows and bushes often reusing old bird nests.

The smallest British rodent is the **harvest mouse**. This tends to be found only around cornfields or where there is long grass. Their numbers have been greatly reduced by modern crop spraying.

The **long tailed field mouse** is an inhabitant of the woodland areas and can be found in Sulham Woods.

The **house mouse** is now much less common than it used to be, owing to the way in which houses are built these days. There are still plenty around however.

In the fourteenth century the bubonic plague was carried mainly by rats, although Berkshire was not hit as badly as some areas. The **black rat** has not been seen in Berkshire for over a hundred years now but the **brown rat** is still to be found, especially around barns and farm buildings. Rat catching used to be a great sport in the area but now rats tend to be dealt with by the District Council whenever they are spotted.

The **field vole** is not very common in this area, preferring the meadows of smaller rivers than the Thames.

Its cousin, the **bank vole** is however very common, especially along the embankments of the railway.

The **water vole** is often referred to as the water rat and is very common all along the banks of the Thames.

The **common hare** is not so common as it once was. It is a creature of the open field and they can still be seen occasionally in the fields between Purley and Pangbourne.

The **rabbit** is very common, both in its wild and domesticated forms. The wild rabbit was once really a farm animal and warrens were constructed for them so that they could breed and provide a regular source of food. They are to be found all over Purley and can appear almost anywhere.

