# Rodentia



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# Rodentia

**Rodentia, the quarterly newsletter of Rodentia**

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**Errors & Corrections:**
Should you find any errors, spelling/grammar, factual or otherwise please do let the editor know, especially given that we can update and correct the digital versions.

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2026



Spinifex Hopping Mouse (Notomys alexis)

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**Cover photo: Robert Schwarz, Golden spiny mouse (Acomys russatus), Düsseldorf Aquarium**

# Welcome From the Chair

Welcome to the first edition of Rodentia, the self-titled newsletter of Rodentia. I will keep this short as there is a lot of text from me in this issue but I look forward, optimistically, to filling future editions with your many, many submissions and contributions.

The formation of this club has been a long time coming. I had rather hoped someone else would do it but alas they have not and here we are; someone once said “Sometimes if you want something to exist you have to make it yourself”.

This being the first edition of the publication, it is somewhat an experiment of content and layout and as such I would welcome your input. Please let me know what you like, what you don’t like and any suggestions for improvement. I have very much taken the ‘don’t let perfection get in the way of progress’ path to get to this point.

Assuming you enjoy Rodentia, the club and the newsletter, your thanks should go to Russell Tofts for starting the Rodent Appreciation Group many years ago and laying the foundation for Rodentia, Chris Henwood for his continued contribution to rodents keepers over many decades (see Honorary Members, page four), Emily Jones for being endlessly willing to encourage someone else to do the work of setting it up, and to my wife and children for allowing me the time to set it up and the patience to continue with it.

Where applicable I will add links to the resources and other digital content mentioned throughout the text to a webpage that will be available in the members’ area of the Rodentia website, this will be most easily accessed using the QR on the inside cover. Link inclusion will be denoted by [QR].

# Some Notes That May Help

Below are a couple of notes on scientific names and the format in which animal numbers and sexes are often displayed. For many this will be common knowlege but for any that are not familiar I hope the expalination will improve your undertanding and thus your enjoyment of the articles within.

**Scientific Names**

The scientific binomial name (sometimes incorrectly called the Latin name) of an animal is made up of the genus followed by the species - *Genus species*. For example the Bank vole is *Myodes glareolus*; the genus is *Myodes* and the species is *glareolus*, if there is a sub-species then that follows the species, for example a sub-species of the Bank vole found on the island of Skomer is *Myodes glareolus skomerensis*. The first letter of the genus is always uppercase and all other letters are lowercase. After the first full use, the genus can be abbreviated to the capitalised initial, for example *M. glareolus*. The full scientific name is always italisiced but if formatting in italics is not possible then parentheses can be used and they are often used with the italics, especially when used alongside the common name i.e. the Skomer Bank vole (*Myodes glareolus skomerensis*) is larger than than the mainland Bank vole (*Myodes glareolus*). Using the scientific name removes any ambiguity as to which species you refer and can be of particular use to non-English speakers.

**Animal Numbering\Recording**

You will often something like this when species numbers and sexes are referrenced: 2.3.6 Lesser Egyptian gerbils (*Gerbillus gerbillus*) - the numbers represent the number and sexes of the species, in this example it means there are two males, three females and six unknown\sexed (usually because they are too young to accurately or safely sex), a total of 11 animals. It can be viewed as male.female.unknown or M.F.U. Occasionally you may see a colon being used instead of a fullstop but the meaning remains the same.

# The Need for Rodentia

When I first started keeping rodents (1999-2005) there seemed to be a real enthusiasm and interest in the species of the rodentia order; I remember the excitement and keeness for new species that would become available and the clamour of people wanting to keep them. Fast forward to 2021 after a 16 year rodent hiatus (inflicted by a house move, marriage and children) and things seem to have changed. There doesn't seem to be the attention on rodents that there once was and this is a feeling shared by many in the rodent 'circle' so I'm inclined to believe it's not just my ageing viewpoint.

During my time away there have been many species lost to captivity, perhaps never to be seen again; a few that come to mind are the South African pouched mouse (Saccostomus campestris), Edward's swamp rat (Malacomys edwardsi) and the Southern mountain cavy (Microcavia australis), none of which can be found in zoos either. Without collaboration and sharing it is all too easy for a species to die out, it need only take a single keeper to let their population die out (like I sadly did in 2005), an outbreak of disease or, in the longer term, lack of genetic diversity. Vanity, 'trophy species', and selfishness can play their parts too.

It's not just private keepers, zoos seem to have lost interest too (though not all of them). Of course they need to cater for the ticket buyers who want to see the big animals and meerkats but in terms of conservation and education it seems unreasonable to overlook an order that contains 40% of all mammal species. Take for example my nearest zoo Marwell, in the past they have kept over 40 species of rodent, today they keep just two - the Brazilian or Wild cavy (Cavia aperea) and the Chacoan mara (Pediolagus salinicola). Zoos also seem less willing to work and exchange with private keepers.

Importation rule changes and the inevitable impact of Brexit has made it harder to bring new species to the UK in numbers that would make a healthy population viable but this can be overcome by working together.

Private keepers are overlooked for involvement in breeding programs, I think particularly of the Harvest mouse (Micromys minutus) project. Those participating would need to adhere to the guidance from the organiser but there is a big part for private keepers to play here.

In the summer of 2000 Russell Tofts (an honorary member of Rodentia) started the Rodent Appreciation Group with many of the goals I hope Rodentia will work towards. Unfortunately RAG tailed off a few years later and with NAPAK (National Association of Private Animal Keepers) having ended many years ago and ABWAK leaning towards professional keepers, there is a void.

In Germany they have the wonderful BAG Kleinsäuger, this group is focussed on all small mammals not only rodents but they would be a great example to follow. I have relied on Google translate but here is an excerpt of their description -

*'This is an association of committed private owners and zoological institutions. Hand in hand, we pursue a common goal - the keeping and breeding of small mammals. Our focus is not only on exotics, but also in native species. We want to establish healthy stocks in order to preserve the variety of forms of these animals. To this end, we coordinate the close cooperation between private owners and zoos. We want to maintain and expand our livestock. We are committed to this!'*

With all this in mind Rodentia has been started with sharing, collaboration and community at its core: A society for enthusiasts and keepers of rodents; promoting diverse, healthy, and viable populations of non-domestic, native and non-native, rodent species in the UK with the following aims...

- Raise awareness of non-domestic rodents
- Spread knowledge and information as to the care and keeping of non-domestic rodents
- Make it easier to source and exchange non-domestic rodent species
- Promote and facilitate good breeding practices
- Encourage UK zoos to keep and display non-domestic rodent species
- Enable the collaboration between organisations and private keepers

We hope to achieve these aims with the following actions...

- Producing a printed and digital quarterly publication (you're reading it) sent to members. The digital version will be available to non-members after 12 months
- Production of a website to act as a hub for members and non-members, with a members' only area
- Surplus adverts in the printed publication and on the website
- WhatsApp group for members and non-members to chat and advertise surplus
- Production of an online species and keeper directory
- Yearly meeting at a zoo or collection
- Providing a presence at domestic animal shows and where possible allow sales of surplus
- Liaise with zoos for updates to their rodent species and exhibits
- Provide guidance and advice for importing animals from EU states
- Lobby zoos as to the importance of keeping and displaying rodent species
- Provide a framework for private keepers' involvement with organisations
- Fight and inform on the possible introduction of a 'Positive List' to the UK

The lists of aims and actions are subject to improvement and addition.

# A Brief Induction to the Persian Jird

Persian jirds (*Meriones persicus*) are very much like keeping the following parts of the following 'other' animals:

A slightly larger than normal rat - as they love begging and interacting with humans and are generally awake in the evenings for interaction. They are also very agile and will climb and leap using their dextrous front feet and tail for support. Doing best in reasonably-sized single or mixed sex groups, they will befriend other Persians quite easily.

A softer degu - as they love a mainly arboreal enclosure (ideally all metal) with ledges and perches set up all sides to allow for 'hopping' and bouncing from place to place. Although not vegetarians by any means, they love a degu-like mix of fresh and dried plants, flowers and grasses. A generous solid wheel is also a must.



A long thin chinchilla - as they love coming out on their own terms. They don't really like you to handle them in a cuddly way - but will jump all over you. They'll sit and groom or sleep on you - and you can stroke them and run your hands over their long-tufted tail - but the minute you go to encircle them: they are gone - and they can take off at GREAT speed.

Catherine Cragg

# Honorary Members

Both Russell and Chris have been involved with rodents for as long as I can remember and well before that too. Their knowlege and experience spreads to the whole of zoology but it is their rodential credentials we're interested in here. If you get the change to speak with them, take that chance. Listen to all the species they have kept and worked with in the past, all the places at which they have worked and volunteered and the people they have met, AND press them, as I do, to make the effort of write it all down!

There is much knowledge that Chris and Russell can offer Rodentia and I hope we will hear more from them in the future but for now here are a few words from and about themselves...

**Russell Tofts**

I am delighted to have been invited by Matthew to be a part of his Rodent Group. My obsession with animals of all kinds began when I was a toddler. After leaving school, I worked as a zookeeper and eventually found myself employed in London Zoo's Charles Clore Pavilion for Small Mammals. At that time, London Zoo boasted an unrivalled collection of rodents among British zoos. Who can forget the artificial 'cut-away' burrows for various rats, mice, voles, gerbils, and jirds under the nocturnal lighting regime in the Pavilion's basement?




Russell in 1978 by the Sierra Leone Striped Squirrel* cage at Jersey Zoo

Zoos generally keep only a few of the larger rodent species, such as capybara and agoutis. Here lies an opportunity for private keepers to excel, helping to establish species in captivity or prevent them from being lost due to inbreeding or apathy. I began keeping and breeding many species of small rodents myself, and, at one stage, kept over thirty different kinds.

At about this time, I was appointed as the departmental manager of an independent pet superstore, responsible for the small-animal section. Given carte blanche by the owners to develop my department (an ill-advised act of magnanimity that they probably regretted), I immediately set about abusing my position by building up the number of rodent species for sale in the shop until it boasted the most diverse collection to be found in any British pet shop, to the consternation of the store's owners who found that South American jumping mice or Asiatic dormice did not sell as well as hamsters.

I first met Matthew Wright over 25 years ago when he became a member of a rodent group that I founded in the late 1990s. For some years before this, I had run my own pet shop and pet care centre in the Cambridgeshire village of Fulbourn. I noticed that, while there were several organizations, both regional and national, that catered for keepers of Syrian and Russian hamsters, Mongolian gerbils (actually a species of jird), cavies (inevitably called guinea pigs by such clubs), and domestic mice and rats, there was not, as far as I could tell, a single organization for keepers of rodents in general. What was desperately needed, I felt, was an organization for the more serious-minded enthusiast, focusing on species usually ignored by high street pet shops.

I believed that there probably existed a whole community of rodent breeders, many working in isolation, who would benefit from being part of a network where they could

*Russell adds, the squirrels were actually Fire-footed Rope Squirrel (Funisciurus pyrropus). For some reason Jersey Zoo had its own name for some animals.

share ideas and experiences, and exchange animals. So I set one up. It didn't last more than a few years, but this was not due to a lack of interest; rather, I was spreading myself too thin. As other commitments intruded into my time, it became increasingly hard to devote myself to it as wholeheartedly as I would have liked.

After it dissolved, I held onto the hope that some day I might resurrect it, but I never did. So I am absolutely thrilled that Matthew has taken this step. With his obvious commitment and determination, I have no doubt that this organization, unlike my own effort all those years ago, will endure.

**Chris Henwood**

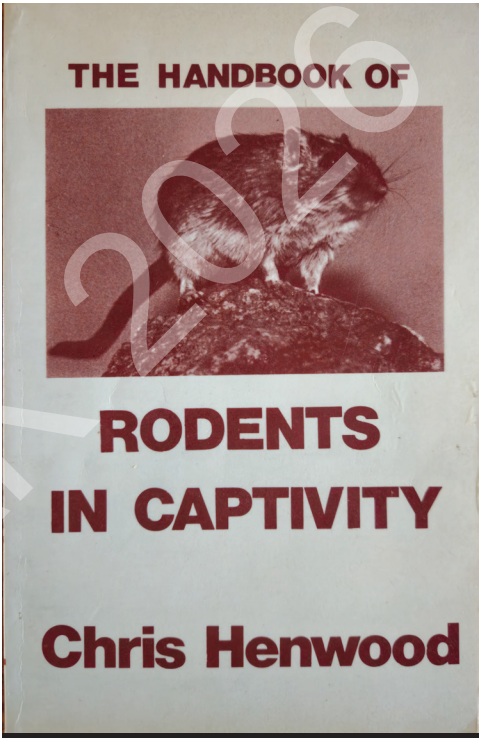
I began keeping rodents seriously in the late 1970's although I went through the usual child's pets of hamsters and guinea pigs. Living next door to a ZSL Head-keeper meant that a lot of time was spent at the Zoo. This eventually led to the acquisition of a small group of Acomys russatus lewisii, and the downward spiral of rodent keeping addiction began.

The collection grew as did my knowledge and interest. Clinton Keeling once commented that in his opinion my collection was one of the best collections of small rodents he knew. Some of the landmarks of my collection, was the first breeding of Rock Cavies, and European Hamsters, both a first in a private collection in the UK. I've managed to keep some quiet rare species kept over the years include Casiragua, Kangaroo Rats, South African Pouched Mice, Collared Lemmings, Norwegian Lemmings, Orkney Voles, and Indian Gerbils. Some with great success while others not so much.



Acomys russatus lewisi
Photo credit: Klaus Rudloff, Berlin

I was one of the major people responsible behind the introduction of the Dwarf Russian Winter White Hamster, the Satin Campbell's Dwarf Russian Hamster, Dominant Spot Chinese, Argente Campbells and the Rex Coated Syrian Hamster to the Hamster fancy. More recently I introduced the satin coated Eastern Spiny Mouse to Europe with the help of the late Joep Vrijuof. As a National and International Judge of small rodents, I have judged in quite a few countries.




The front cover Chris' book
'Rodents in Captivty'

I am author of a number of books and many magazine articles on small pets and their care, as well as subjects as varied as plants, and rare dog breeds, and have appeared on a number of television and radio programmes and advised on a number of others.

While at college I undertook on behalf of the FFPS the groundwork for the first international studbook for the Grevy's Zebra. Also helping in the early moves to reintroduce both the Prezwalski Wild Horse and the Arabian Oryx back to the wild. It was

this work that brought me into close contact with a number of famous zoo owners who were all extremely helpful with the many queries I had for them. John Knowles (Marwell Zoo), John Aspinall (Howletts and Port Lympne), James Dolan Jr (San Diego Zoo) and Andrei Bannikov (Soviet Academy of Science) among others.
I am fortunate in that even though these have now gone I still have contacts with several zoos, universities and private collectors throughout the world.

Now age is rapidly advancing my collection is tiny compared to what it once was, but my interest and passion for rodents and indeed all animal and plants, of which I have far too many continues. I can be contacted at https://www.facebook.com/ChrisHenwoodBrighton/ [QR].

# Keeping Voles

Voles are small (for the most part) relatives of hamsters, generally living in grass, or hedgerows and riverbanks. Their stout faces, relatively short tails and flat ears are indicative of life in the undergrowth, which provides them with shelter and amenities.
As with all species that we have an interest in keeping captive, it is of particular importance to provide an environment that mimics this natural state, for the wellbeing of an animal that's had millions of years to evolve perfectly for its place on earth.

Keeping voles has its challenges: they store food in caches, are subterranean and will chew through almost anything. That isn't where the complexities stop, however. As humans, with an interest in keeping animals, we strive to provide a clean, pleasant environment for the animals in our care, but occasionally this doesn't serve the species we keep.

My collection holds four species of vole: Gunther's (*Microtus guentheri*), Brandt's (*Lasiopodomys brandtii*), Bank (*Myodes glareolus*) and Reed (*Alexandromys fortis*). These voles may be geographically distant in the wild, but they all share a similar need: to be left alone. It pleases me to encourage my animals to procreate, and although not my sole aim in keeping them, is a welcome bonus if they are successful in raising litters.

Over the years, I have had most success with vole species by letting them make their own bed and providing them with the necessary materials to do so. Invariably this is very displeasing to the human eye, voles love dark, fibrous and damp environments and do not like to be disturbed once they have it to their liking. Layering straw and grass with coconut fibre and wood shavings, provides a stable substrate for chamber building, perfect for a subterranean life. Your animals will store their food, it will look ugly and you won't see them readily, but there will also be a high chance of breeding success, should you sit it out and resist the urge to clean the tank!

Emily Jones



Left to right: Reed vole, Bank vole and Gunther's vole

# Not Naked. Not a Mole. Not a Rat

The naked mole rat (Heterocephalus glaber) is a highly adapted rodent native to the arid regions of East Africa. It lives entirely underground and for this completely subterranean lifestyle it has evolved many remarkable adaptations.



Naked mole rats are eusocial, meaning they live in highly organised colonies with a division of labour as you would think of for insects such as bees and ants. A single queen (sometimes, but rarely two) the only female capable of breeding, oversees the colony which can include up to 300 individuals. The rest of the colony consists of sterile females and males that serve as workers, foragers, diggers, and soldiers.

The colonies live in large, complex closed tunnel systems that can run for miles. While these tunnels provide a safe haven from predators and the elements, their self-contained nature makes them low in oxygen, naked mole rats can tolerate hypoxia (low oxygen levels) by means of many behavioural, physiological and biological strategies.

While lack of obvious hair may at first lead you to think of them as being cold, in a colony situation this nakedness and their highly vascularised skin makes for efficient heat transfer between individuals when bundled together.



Aside from the nakedness, the most obvious physical adaptation of the naked mole rat is its oversized incisors which grow on the outside of the mouth and are used to gnaw through the tough dry earth and sand of the desert. Their powerful claws and cylindrical body shape are also adapted for efficient tunnelling.

The number of adaptations seems endless, it is even speculated that their eyes, that have grown to be almost useless for sight underground, are now used to detect air flow in the burrow system.

They are noted for their exceptional longevity with some living up to 30 years - far longer than other rodents, especially those of a similar size. This long lifespan is attributed to their

resistance to cancer and ageing-related diseases. Naked mole rats seem to be largely immune to cancer, likely due to a unique cellular compound, hyaluronan, which prevents tumour formation. Studies suggest that their cells have an enhanced ability to repair DNA damage, contributing to their resistance to age-related diseases.

Another fascinating trait of the naked mole rat is its insensitivity to certain types of pain. Unlike most mammals, naked mole rats lack the TRPV1 receptor which is responsible for sensing heat and acidity-induced pain. Additionally, their insensitivity extends to inflammation, helping them endure the constant physical stress of tunnelling and interaction with the rough underground environment.



I can't think of a more highly adapted rodent (or perhaps even land mammal) than the naked mole rat but I would welcome suggestions.

Naked mole rats are a species I never thought I would be given the opportunity to keep. They are not a species that you can take on lightly; they need to be kept at a steady 27-30°c and between 50-85% relative humidity. Their physical habitat setup is probably more well known, many will have seen it in zoos; a series of tubes and chambers, many with a specific purpose i.e. bedroom, toilet, food store etc.



My setup consists of an insulated enclosure heated by a 200w tubular heater. Within the enclosure are the tube connected acrylic chambers. Alternate chambers are heated by 7w heat mats. The tubular heater and heat mats are controlled by a habi-stat thermostat with the sensor within one of the heat mat heated chambers. Having the tube heater and the heat mats makes for an efficient heating of the space and a level of redundancy if one or the other should fail. I use a 'smart' temperature and humidity sensor to monitor the levels inside the main enclosure - I will be notified on my phone if either of the temperature or humidity moves outside of the specified range. The individual chambers are 250L x 150W x 150Hmm.

I had the 4mm acrylic sheet cut and drilled at a local plastics supplier and the 50mm outer diameter tubes were sourced from the internet (Temu). The acrylic sheet panels are joined using superglue to form the chambers. Rubber o-rings are used to hold the tubes in place between the chambers. Should my colony start breeding it will be possible to expand the number of tunnels and chambers easily.




Each chamber is filled with about 5cm of wood shavings and a little straw. They seem to enjoy moving the shavings and straw around. They are olfactory beasts and scent plays a big part in the colony stability so only one chamber is cleaned out at a time and the toilet is never cleaned out completely as its bouquet greatly contributes to re-scenting of the cleaned chambers and maintains the identity of the colony.

They don't take water directly (and none is offered), all necessary moisture comes from their diet of root vegetables; carrots, swede, parsnip, sweet potato - sweet potato being a favourite. No other food is offered though I believe some provide a herbivore pellet.

I offer this information from a standpoint of a novice and of relative ignorance; there are many better placed in terms of knowledge and experience; we should hear from some of them in future editions.

Matthew Wright

**Dates for your Diary**

If all goes to plan, Rodentia will have a stand at the following events.

- 18th January 2025 - Bradford Small Animal Show - Doncaster
- 13th September 2025 - Real London Show - Bracknell
- 11th October 2025 - London Championship Show - Grantham

**AGM**

Depending on membership uptake, we would look to have our AGM at a zoo this year and this would possibly be in May. I will email updates on date and venue, and will include it in the next edition of the newletter.

**Keeper and Species Database**

I'm currently in consultation with a few developers with regards to the database. I will keep members updated and when complete it should be an invaluable resource.

# Spotlight On The Small: Curating the Mammal Collection at Cannon Hall Farm

For many of you zoo and exotic animal enthusiasts 'Cannon Hall Farm' may still be a new name to you. Or perhaps you have heard of us, but heard the word 'farm' and subsequently didn't give us a second thought for non-domestic species. You may, then, be surprised to hear that at time of writing we hold the UK's widest rodent collection as well as the UK's widest nocturnal animal collection. [I too believe CHF to hold the greatest number of rodent species in the UK but I would be interested to hear if anyone thinks otherwise. -Ed]



Cannon Hall Farm, privately owned by the Nicholson family, first opened to visitors back in 1989 initially as an open working farm. Over the years the farm grew and evolved, expanding its animal collection and improving its layout many times. Down the line it eventually gained its zoo license, expanding into a variety of non-domestic and non-native species. The most recent big development on the zoo side of operations and the main focus of this article is 'The Mammal House'. First opened to the public at the start of 2022 The Mammal House features 31 enclosures in a full nocturnal reverse light cycle, two additional 'daylight' enclosures (not on the reverse light cycle) and three freshwater fish tanks. At time of writing the total number of mammal species on display inside the Mammal House is 23 with 17 of those being rodents. An additional three species of rodent can be found in separate outdoor enclosures elsewhere across site; cape porcupine (*Hystrix africaeaustralis*), black tailed prairie dog (*Cynomys ludovicianus*) and Eurasian red squirrel (*Sciurus vulgaris*), bringing the total number of rodent species displayed at Cannon Hall Farm to 20 (and counting).

When I first took on my role at Cannon Hall Farm in June 2021 The Mammal House stood as an empty shell. The building and most of the enclosures were in place however no residents had yet moved in with the pandemic having delayed the completion of the project. I was given a brief but precise remit for the house; interesting small mammals that 'wow'. The species curation and overall management of the mammal collection were now in my hands and I began to think about several things in order to start taking the collection forward; What would thrive in the dimensions of the spaces I had? What species are largely underrepresented or not even represented at all? What type of collection would hold the most educational and conservation value whilst still being visually interesting and exciting to the general public?

I think it's fair to say that out of all mammalian taxa rodents still draw the short straw when it comes to representation in zoological collections. Not every time but very often they are a 'filler', perhaps carefully placed in areas of footfall traffic to give visitors additional things to look at (usually briefly) on their way from one large animal enclosure to another OR sidekicks to the larger stars of the show to make multi-species exhibits more dynamic (looking at the good old agouti for that one). Despite rodentia being the largest order of mammals, making up 40% of all mammalian life on the planet, how often do we see zoos representing them as a main exhibit? How often is the 'coming soon' marketing and advertising dedicated to boosting anticipation for the arrival of a new rodent enclosure? With such little representation combined with a huge need for increased educational opportunity for the public about a misunderstood and often persecuted group of animals it was an easy decision on my part to give rodents the main spotlight in The Mammal House. Firstly, the house was changed onto a reverse light cycle system to give our visitors the best opportunity to see our animals active as

most rodents and small mammals suitable for our spaces are nocturnal. With other nocturnal exhibits closing and on a declining trend in the UK it was an exciting opportunity to add such a large one onto the map. We next added in our heating across all enclosures and then I began setting up enclosures specifically for their intended residents. In November 2021, still prior to public opening, the first species began to arrive; Muenster yellow-toothed cavy (*Galea monasteriensis*), Gambian pouched rats (*Cricetomys gambianus*), Brazilian cavy (*Cavia aperea*), barbary striped grass mice (*Lemniscomys barbarus*), cactus mice (*Peromyscus eremicus*), Persian jirds (*Meriones persicus*), Brandt's voles (*Lasiopodomys brandtii*) and harvest mice (*Micromys minutus*). Then in January 2022 we made the trip down to the soon-to-be closing Bristol Zoo to collect further additional species from the impressive nocturnal veteran of Twilight World; black rats (*Rattus rattus*), Turkish spiny mice (*Acomys cilicicus*) and house mice (*Mus musculus*).



Now that a good number of enclosures had been filled and the first residents had settled it was decided to open The Mammal House to the public that February, prior to filling all of the enclosures. This gave us the opportunity to allow our visitors to follow the development of the house with every new species added after opening and really build anticipation and excitement for further new arrivals with our marketing. It also allowed us to really take note of visitor reaction to each new species both online and within the house itself, in particular within our 3000+ 'Supporters' community (subscribers to Cannon Hall Farm). As the collection progressed the most popular species with visitors have undoubtedly been our Northern Luzon giant cloud rats (*Phloeomys pallidus*), European water voles (*Arvicola amphibius*) and African pygmy mice (*Mus minutoides*). We can also see a change in perception for rodents as visitors make their way through, with many visitors very often beginning their journey through a little nervous and by the end feeling much more relaxed with more empathy for and interest in rodents. Our black rats often steal the show and change a negative perception to a positive one with their acrobatic and energetic displays.



Whilst the collection grows in numbers and popularity, I'm confident that by properly assessing and recording the educational, emotional and behavioural impact it has on our visitors we can provide an insight into how we, zoos, can better represent and utilize our rodent collections to make a more extensive positive impact for this amazing order of animals.

Georgie Kaye, Head of Mammals, Cannon Hall Farm

# Zoo Rodent Review

Rodents. Loved by few, and kept by far less, are a group of animals rarely focused on in zoos. If I could wave my imaginary curatorial wand I would see more houses dedicated to Rodentia, rather than as a periphery exhibit in the shadow of large and more popular ABC species. The chimpanzee house at Dudley Zoo springs to mind, where naked mole rats accompany the all-female troop of apes. We can't all be as lucky as the locals to Cannon Hall Farm, who can enter a building home to over 20 species of rodent, making it the largest on show collection in the UK. In late 2024, I was able to visit five zoological establishments in the South-East (UK), home to a range of rodents from capybara (*Hydrochoerus hydrochaeris*) to the African pygmy mouse (*Mus minutoides*). I hope to provide an overview of the species you might expect to see if visiting, though if you have my luck, you certainly won't see them all.





**Drusillas Park**

The history of rodents in the collection is rich with former holdings including both greater (*Gerbillus pyramidum*) and lesser (*Gerbillus gerbillus*) Egyptian jirds, Orkney voles (*Microtus arvalis orcadensis*), Patagonian mara (*Dolichotis patagonum*), and more.
Today, its diversity of small rodents is greatly reduced, and instead focuses on larger and more commonly housed species (bar one



semi-aquatic treat). Azaras agouti (*Dasyprocta azarae*) may be found in two separate mixed-species enclosures. One with giant anteater and another with squirrel monkeys, with both enclosures well catered to the agoutis needs.
Cape porcupines (*Hystrix africaeaustralis*) are found mixed with banded mongoose, and you can walk above the exhibit via a





raised platform. The enclosure is well furnished but as with most porcupines, these individuals were found in the warmth of their house.

For me, the star rodents at Drusillas are the North American beavers (*Castor canadensis*). Held in an award-winning enclosure (recipient of the first UFAW Exhibit Award in 1987), though now extended and mixed with capybara (*Hydrochoerus hydrochaeris*), you can see three older looking individuals (A father and two sons which were born at the park in 2013). All were incredibly active, with two of the beavers seen swimming towards closing time. A paid visitor experience is also offered, where you can feed and interact with both species.

A nice sized group of black-tailed prairie dogs (*Cynomys ludovicianus*) are held in a well themed exhibit and have been offered the opportunity to dig, evidenced by the numerous burrow entrances. Domestic mice and guinea pigs were both signposted in the farmyard area of the zoo but were unseen.



**Bede's Zoo**

Some readers might disagree with calling the following collection a zoo as it doesn't hold a zoo license and is found within a school. I, however, am strongly inclined to call it one. It not only holds a strong exotic animal collection and has a guidebook, but is rightly named "Bede's Zoo". Bede's is well known among zoo nerds for its rarely kept Grandidier's vontsira, but less so for its small yet mighty rodent collection. Azaras agouti (Dasyprocta azarae) are again mixed with squirrel monkeys, apparently a common occurrence in the South-East. The only other rodents kept outdoors are the zoos hazel dormouse (*Muscardinus avellanarius*). Since 2013, Bede's has actively contributed to the release programme, and they continue to maintain the species with regular breeding success.



The remaining rodents are kept in the zoos mammal room, which adjoins the vontsiras indoor housing. Here you'll find spinifex hopping mice (*Notomys alexis*), a species that I would never have imagined seeing prior to their 2019 arrival at Hamerton Zoo. It is from there that they have quickly been dispersed following incredible breeding successes, and although difficult travellers, they do settle and reproduce, meaning they are becoming more readily available to private keepers. There are basic yet well done enclosures for acacia rats (*Thallomys paedulcus*) and Nuemans grass rats (*Arvicanthis neumanni*), with the latter

numbering upwards of 60 individuals, separated by sex to limit any further breeding.



Harvest mouse (*Micromys minutus*) are accompanied by chinchilla, guinea pigs and a pair of recently acquired wild-line golden hamsters (in separate enclosures, of course). Historically, Bede's have kept Siberian chipmunk (*Eutamias sibiricus*), a species becoming rarer in captivity each year due to their status on the EU's Invasive Species List, and Mongolian jird (*Meriones unguiculatus*).

**Knockhatch Adventure Park**

Only a five-minute drive from Bede's Zoo, Knockhatch is a small collection that housed only one exotic species of rodent during my early December 2024 visit. 0.0.6 black-tailed prairie dogs (*Cynomys ludovicianus*) are kept in an enclosure reminiscent of the one found at Drusillas and are breeding according to keepers.



Since visiting, three Indian crested porcupines arrived in mid-December from a collection in Leeds, and there are hopes to bring in cabybara (*Hydrochoerus hydrochaeris*) if the zoo can expand beyond its current boundaries. Domestic guinea pigs and rabbits are kept in a farmyard zone.

**British Wildlife Centre**

A destination for any rodent nerd, the British Wildlife Centre (BWC) likely holds the most comprehensive collection of native rodents (and mustelids) in the UK. By my count, 12 species are currently held, though as indicated at the start of this article, very few were seen. The three rodent species kept outside are all part of separate breed to release programmes. Like Bede's, the BWC are involved in the hazel dormouse (*Muscardinus avellanarius*) programme and maintain several pairs in covered outdoor enclosures. Though only one individual was seen, red squirrels (*Sciurus vulgaris*) are kept in a large, wooded walkthrough with a trio of muntjac, and posed well for guests during the keeper talk. The final breed to release species are water voles (*Arvicola amphibius*), kept in a simple yet naturalistic open-topped enclosure.



All other rodents are kept indoors across two main areas, some in the "Barn" and the rest in the nocturnal house. In the barn, black (*Rattus rattus*) and brown rats (*Rattus norvegicus*) are held in large and enriching enclosures, a common theme for the rodents at this zoo. House (*Mus musculus*), Harvest (*Micromys minutus*), Yellow-necked (*Apodemus flavicollis*) and Wood mouse (*Apodemus sylvaticus*) are all kept here, as are bank (*Clethrionomys glareolus*) and field vole (*Microtus agrestis*). All are in similar enclosures filled with natural materials, with







some adjoined to Perspex covered burrows. Many edible dormouse (*Glis glis*), a species larger than I had realised, are kept in large enclosures in the nocturnal house. If visiting, don't be disappointed if you see less than a handful of the rodents listed above. I'd imagine that if you are persistent, and not limited by time as I was, you would have more luck.

**Tilgate Nature Centre**

A unique zoo in that it is owned and run by the local council, Tilgate Nature Centre has a strong rodent collection in a world where most zoos have decreased their focus on the Order. Most rodents in the zoo are kept in one building near the entrance, and the largest you can find is a lone female cape porcupine (*Hystrix africaeaustralis*) that they hope to pair up soon. In addition, Harvest mouse (*Micromys minutus*) are kept off-show and African dormouse (*Graphiurus murinus*), African pygmy mouse (*Mus minutoides*) and Turkish spiny mouse (*Acomys cilicicus*) are kept in nicely furnished enclosures. To top the building off, a dozen regularly reproducing gundi (*Ctenodactylus gundi*) are found, whilst nearly 40 naked mole rats (*Heterocephalus glaber*) have access to a large tunnel system as seen in most zoos that keep the species; Uniquely, the colony has two breeding queens.

Elsewhere, 1.2 capybara (*Hydrochoerus hydrochaeris*) are mixed with lowland tapir, and 2.0 Azaras agouti (*Dasyprocta azarae*) with kookaburra in a small aviary. Former holdings include red squirrels (*Sciurus vulgaris*), Patagonian (*Dolichotis patagonum*), and Chacoan Mara (*Pediolagus salinicola*), a species that has gained some focus from Beale Park in an attempt to revive the UK population. A recent import of a pair (1.1) to Marwell Zoo from mainland Europe will hopefully support this.

Thomas Collard







Above are two images of my own from the same visit to Tilgate. This was part of a IZES (Independent Zoo Enthusiasts Society) [QR] meeting.

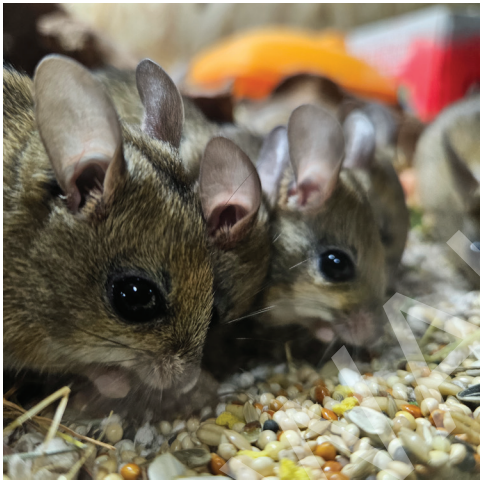
Below is an excellent photo by Rob Vaughan of a Gundi at Tilgate Nature Centre again from the IZES meeting.



The Common Gundi (*Ctenodactylus gundi*) is a saxicolous rodent from northern Africa. As the sign in the Tilgate enclosure (page 15) suggests, their range is based broadly around the Atlas mountains. It would be reasonable, I think, to consider them an African evolutionary equivalent to the South American cavy species.

# Spinifex Hopping Mice

Spinifex hopping mice (Notomys alexis), sometimes referred to by their traditional Aboriginal name, Tarkawara have been kept by zoos for some while but only entered private hands relatively recently. The individuals in UK and European zoos are there on agreement with the Australian government that means they can not be passed to private, uncredited keepers. Somewhere along the line, someone in Europe decided they didn't much like that agreement and the hopping mice made their way to private hands. Peter Watson had brought some over from Germany in 2022 but they did not breed reliably enough to pass on to other keepers. In 2023 I imported some, again from Germany, and was able to distribute them to other keepers.



For most the experience with the spinifex has been stable but unproductive; the adults have thrived but with no breeding occurring despite much mating. Chris Henwood was lucky enough to have a litter and they raised a single individual but nothing since. Lucy Allen on the other hand has had great success, from a single pair there have been 15 young from six litters.

My experience is somewhat polarised, my group from 2023 were doing well but with no litters when suddenly over two days all but one of them died. The remaining individual then gave birth to a litter of three but I fear the disturbances were too much and the litter died. In early 2024 I was able to bring another small group of 4.4 over (from Germany). They continued to do well and in December they had a litter of six. It is not clear if this is from a single female or multiple as this is quite a large litter size for the species. You'll know about it if you do have a litter as they are very vocal and they will continue with the noise until their eyes open at around 19 days.

In conversation with Ben McRobie, who had great success with the mice at Hamerton Zoo, it was discussed that in the enclosure they had underfloor heating set to 24°c air temp and with good ventilation which would result in low humidity. Lucy's hoppers are kept at an ambient temperature of around 20°c with no additional heating and only natural lighting. My mice are kept at a minimum of 17°c with natural lighting plus low-level LED lighting in the room from 07:00-20:00. Both Ben and Lucy offered a heat lamp but it was not used. I have installed a heat mat to one corner of the tank but much like the heat lamp, it wasn't utilised, in fact they actively moved their nest away from it.

I have heard it suggested that the mice like a choice of mate and thus simply placing a male and female together will not necessarily result in successful breeding. I would suggest that breeding success with this species relies on equal parts of high ambient temperature and good luck.

Even if they don't breed, which I do appreciate not everybody is concerned with, they are a charming species to keep and observe.

Matthew Wright



# Members' Adverts

Harvest Mice (*Micromys minutus*)
Steppe Lemmings (*Lagurus lagurus*)
African Pygmy Mice (*Mus minutoides*)
Acacia rat (young males) (*Thallomys paedulucus*)
African Pygmy Dormice (*Graphiurus murinus*)
Retired Duprasi (*Pachyuromys duprasi*)

I will be pairing up with aim of breeding Duprasi again soon.

Collection from Notts, or will deliver within reason for fuel. Visit Derby and Stone regularly.

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Cheesman's Gerbil (males) (*Gerbillus cheesmani*)
Shaw's Jird (*Meriones shawi*)
Nile Spiny Mouse (*Acomys cahirinus cahirinus*)
Turkish Spiny Mouse (*Acomys cilicicus*)
Pygmy Spiny Mouse (*Acomys spinosissimus*)
Eastern Spiny Mouse (*Acomys dimidiatus*)
Spinifex Hopping Mouse (*Notomys alexis*)
Cactus Mouse (*Peromyscus eremicus*)
Zebra Mouse (*Lemniscomys barbarus*)
Neumann's Grass Rat (*Arvicanthis neumanni*)
Gunther's Vole (*Microtus guentheri*)
Mocó\Rock Cavy (male) (*Kerodon rupestris*)

I am looking for Bushy-tailed jirds, Mouse-like hamsters, and Golden spiny mice.

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Swamp\Greater Cavy (*Cavia magna*)

Hambrook, West Sussex
Hambrookhill@gmail.com
07860 746420

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Harvest Mice (*Micromys minutus*)
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If you would like to place an advert please email editor@rodentia.info [QR] with your advert text, location and phone number and/or email address.

Members of Rodentia are often driving around the country and attending shows so it may be possible for animals to be collected and/or dropped off for a contribution to fuel costs.

# Collection News

Unfortunately, my remaining pair of aging Golden spiny mice (*Acomys russatus*) died within a few weeks of each other around the new year. When I got them they were already looking old and I had had them for around one year. I believe there are now only two keepers in the UK. I hadn't had great luck with them as a species but they are a favourite of mine and I'd like to find some more.

Another notable loss was my female Mocó or Rock cavy (*Kerodon rupestris*); another species I've had bad luck with. This was a sudden death and out of the blue but not totally unexpected as I've had it happen before and also seen it reported in a NAPAK newsletter [QR] from 1992.

Matthew Wright

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After many years searching I have finally been able to source some more dormice species. I now hold 1.2 *Glis glis* and 1.2 *Eliomys quercinus*.

Emily Jones

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I am elated to have sourced a group of Eastern Deer Mice (*Peromyscus maniculatus*) with the aid of other Rodentia members. I am looking forward to working with this species again after a long hiatus. I aim to establish this species within the hobby once more and increase genetic diversity through further acquisitions.

Josh Carter

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If you have any changes of note to your collection, please email editor@rodentia.info for inclusion.

# Feedback

Especially for this first publication I would really appreciate your feedback on absolutely anything you liked or disliked.

There is also something specific you can feedback on: Most of the text on this page is smaller than the rest of the pages, would you be happy for the majority of the text to be this smaller size?

Email feedback to editor@rodentia.info.