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(all are available via the author)

Derek Whiteley
Sheffield Museum

REMINISCENCES OF A PUNK NATURALIST!

1962 saw the opening of Doncaster's new glass and concrete supermarket-style museum, the old affectionately remembered establishment, with its bee hive and none too healthy zoo, having been demolished to make way for a new supermarket-style technical college. Just months before the civic opening the staff, fewer in those days, panic-stricken by the shortness of time, slaved at 'E' type pace and burnt oceans of midnight oil to fill endless runs of huge display cases. Initially, displays were installed with care and dedication and consultants were engaged to advise on finer points of design and lighting - later, cases got the 6" nail and evo-stick treatment! Considering the incredibly short time the exhibition programme took to complete, the displays were of a high standard, effective and ingenious. The aim however, was to re-display at a more composed pace, incorporating a greater element of interpretation and local relevance. When a leisurely 13 years later, the present staff got round to assembling information for a new series of mammal displays; it came as something of a shock to discover that almost nothing worth knowing was available on local mammals! Distribution surveys and investigations into the history, ecology, diet, breeding biology etc of local species were launched, little realising what work would be involved

and what discoveries made. After finding that the key to the intimate subtleties of a mammal's life lay amongst the 'big bits' of its excrement or in the regurgitations or excrement of its predators, the race was on, apparently to corner the world market in faeces, stomach contents and pellets. With offices and store rooms becoming clogged with steaming heaps of dung, the weak stomached manfully suppressed vomiting spasms, unsympathetic attendants flung wide windows for super efficient ventilation, and those not familiar with the activities of the natural history section even accused each other of neglecting underarm or other forms of personal hygiene. Enthusiasts, however, intoxicated by a lust for scientific discovery, demanded that excrement from the rare rectums or from the more exotic corners of Yorkshire be incubated to see what hatched out.

Hundreds of fox droppings, thousands of owl pellets and many bat parasites later it was clear that this grotesquely foul though highly fertile exercise had provided enough facts, discoveries and ideas for display themes, publications and lectures for years to come. Interminable owl pellet dissections coughed up many new localities for under recorded mammals and showed that barn owls eat gastropods and grass snakes! Also, by establishing the existence of harvest mouse in Yorkshire, it proved generations of sceptics wrong and sparked off detailed studies of distribution, habitat preference and breeding biology. It seems that Yorkshire harvest mice are lowland specialists, mainly occurring below the 50' contour- though one would-be alpinist near Sheffield occurred at 750'. They have a shorter and later breeding period and have small litters than do their south of England cousins. Their favourite nesting plant, Phalaris, was not universally accepted, Montbretia attracted the 'gay' element and what must have been a 'punk' mouse was reported nesting in a bag of nails!

Wafer thin or partially burst hedgehog road casualties showed a strong suburban orientation and served to monitor the main events in the hedgehog calendar. The mysteries of diet were unravelled by the analysis of droppings. Gleaming fresh faeces, obligingly deposited on the lawn at home were brought in with the milk each morning during the drought year of 1976. The scarcity of soft bodied prey drove starving urchins to taste the toxic juices of Coccinellid beetles. Ants were consumed by the hundred and earwigs provided a handy gastronomic stand-by. After the first autumn rains succulent earthworms surfaced from sub-soil entombment to be eagerly devoured along with lepidopteran larvae.

Studies of bat roosts provided many revelations, not least for the onlooking public, though the biggest surprises came from the analysis of the smallest droppings. Picking the big bits out of noctule dung requires the eye and skill of an expert seamstress. Fragments of well masticated invertebrate exoskeleton, still bearing tell-tale

sculpturing, bristles and hairs, showed that these supposedly high-flying bats took a fair proportion of terrestrial prey including a wingless weevil and a tube-dwelling spider. Fragments of the bark beetle Rhizophagus politus (Hell) constituted only the third Yorkshire record and the bat's capture of a small chafer must have been like catching a machinegun bullet between its teeth!

Studying the unbelievably catholic diets of foxes, the original gastronomic opportunists, provided hours of bizarre entertainment - reports on the contents of some 'urban' droppings being unpublishable even in this permissive era! Sand spangled droppings from coastal fox populations showed that winter storms and oil spills provided harvests of corpses on which to scavenge. Similarly spring and autumn migrants, enfeebled by their ordeals, fell easy prey, and the contents of choc-ice wrappers, fish and chip papers and scraps from picnic lunches left by holiday makers supplement the summer diet. Foxes in arable areas feast on rodents attracted to field-side root crop stores - dental remains showing that inexperienced debutante and geriatric rats were most frequently taken. Wefts of overhead cables around South Yorkshire power stations provide a constant 'rain' of mutilated bird strike victims, racing pigeons being the staple fare though whooper swans form a seasonal treat. Pennine foxes dine on red grouse and mountain hare whereas their urban counterparts in down town Doncaster make do on a diet of Kentucky fired chicken and used rubber goods!

Colin Howes
Doncaster

NB. No wonder this character isn't recognised by the Museums Association or even by Doncaster Museum - See Museums Year Book 1978 ??

TAPPING THE THIRD SOURCE

Whilst some museums have traditionally gathered information on the flora and fauna of their districts in a systematic way, it is only recently that this aspect of the biological curator's work has received a major stimulus following consultations with the Biological Records Centre. Fearfull of being sunk without trace beneath a plethora of records being sent to them, this body initiated discussions with the Museums Association and other interested parties directed at the establishment of Regional Biological Data Banks. Many of these banks have now been established and most though not all, are based on the natural history departments of museums so that many biological curators find that work on the data bank now adds to their