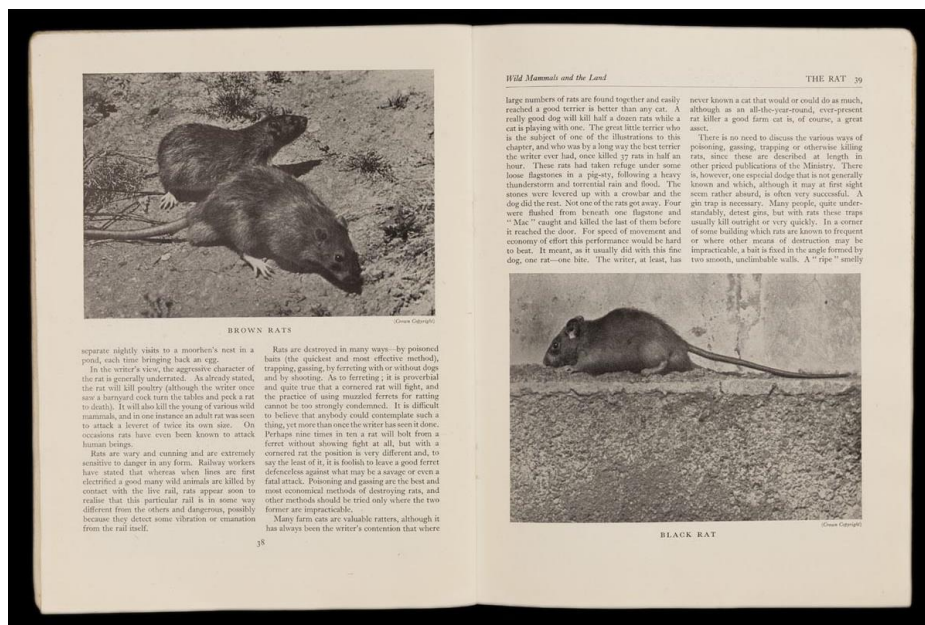


# 6. Wild Mammals Bulletin

*Professor Karen Sayer of Leeds Trinity University introduces us to the place of wildlife on mid-century farms. She offers a critical overview of advice offered to the farming community of this period. Her fascinating exploration also introduces us to aspects of her recent MERL Fellowship work on rats and pest control and to her ongoing research into mid-century farming as part of the FIELD research project team.*

## F. Howard Lancum, Wild Mammals and the Land (London: HMSO, 1951)

Frank Howard Lancum's *Wild Mammals and the Land* (1951), was Bulletin No. 150 from the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries. It was not a typical 'Bulletin'. It drew in its audience through anecdote, atomic and colourful imagery, and a lexicon (for the baddies) centred on villains, aliens, and enemies. These were the nation's allies and foes in agriculture, as British farmers set about securing a plentiful food supply for the country, which was not only still recovering from war but also still rationed. Despite what he recognised as their beauty in some cases, with an appreciation for playful fox cubs and 'bloodthirsty' weasels, some of the mammals described here were firmly in Lancum's sights for their 'thoroughly bad character'. Brown rats were ranked 'No1 in the Ministry's mammalian "Rouges' Gallery'", followed by rabbits, then grey squirrels. Nevertheless, digestive tracts dissected (the contents tabulated at the end of the 60-page booklet); observations from naturalists old and young, farmers and farm workers, and County Pests Officers discussed; he stood in firm defence of others that had acquired a bad name in the past: stoats, badgers and hedgehogs. Folklore was becoming quaint in the face of research.



A double-page spread on brown rats showing the species by species approach taken in the bulletin (pp.38-39).

Aimed squarely at a reader on a journey of discovery, who stood outside farming looking in, *Wild Mammals* nearest HMSO competitor was *British Farming: an illustrated account of all branches of agriculture in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, a story of progress in providing food from Britain's fields* (1951). Priced at 3s. 6d. and focused on what *Wild Mammals* refers to as the 'economic aspect', *British Farming* was prepared for the Ministry by the Central Office of Information, with contributions the new post-War professional cadre of agriculturalists: farm managers, professors and specialist lecturers in agriculture, MAFF advisors inspectors, and officers. A celebration of progress and technical advance, its narrative commenced with scenes of retreating ice shaping the land and a history of British agriculture dating to the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE; it contained nothing about wildlife. *Wild Mammals* followed instead in the footsteps of what MAFF stated was the 'remarkable success of Bulletin 140, *Wild Birds and the Land*' (1948).



Detail of photograph by A. R. Thompson showing harvest-mice, as described as a 'furry atom' (p.55).

Lancum, (MAFF's Advisory Ornithologist) wrote both *Wild Mammals* and *Wild Birds*, but his connection to MAFF and experience was much more wide ranging. As was noted in its Foreword, Bulletin No. 150 represented an updated and condensed version of his longer commercial work *Wild Animals and the Land*, (1947). He had also been a press officer for MAFF during the Second World War, with letters and short articles published during that period in the *Times*. An expert on his subject and well-versed in making his topic accessible to the wider public, he often went for the nicest possible turn of phrase. In one notable example, his description of the harvest-mouse, the language of the Atomic Age coincides with Nature: 'Few of our native mammals are more pleasing to observe than this furry atom' (53). This was the essence of the 'modern' rural landscape presented in the Bulletin. Where he occasionally dipped into fact, such as the legal duties on farmers and occupiers of land for pest management, quantified the damage done by rats (£25,000,000 p.a.) and noted a couple of

schemes offered by County Agricultural Executive Committees, he seemed more interested in telling tales: a story of his terrier “Mac” catching 37 rats in half an hour; and a reminiscence about a weasel who bit his boot in order to defend her young. Or, representing the case for the farmer with passion against those who would keep pests as pets: ‘Nobody who has any regard for the welfare of agriculture... will tolerate [the squirrel]... By some it seems still to be regarded as a “pretty little creature”’; the man on the land with a living to get has, more aptly, named it the “tree rat”.’ (32)

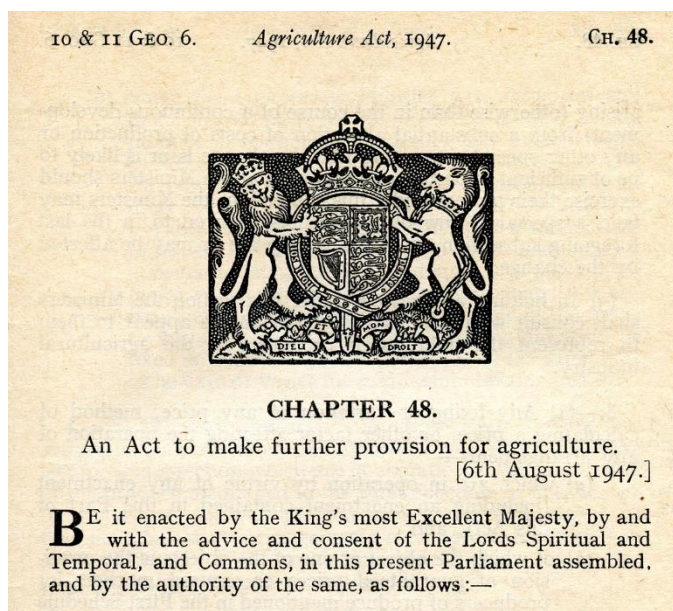
The Ministry’s Bulletins run into the hundreds (including revisions and several that were superseded by later versions) and were mostly mundane. They included practical briefings such as No. 3, ‘the Improvement of Grassland’ (5<sup>th</sup> edn. 1937), and covered topics ranging from livestock management, instructions for fruit, flower and vegetable production, to vermin, pest and disease control across the farm (e.g. No. 24, ‘Cereal smuts and their control’ (1930)). As so called ‘grey’ literature it’s often difficult to find out much about their production, circulation, or reception, but they did go in for self-promotion. According to a review reprinted in No. 26, ‘Johne’s Disease in Cattle’ (1931), *Country Life* believed that these ‘bulletins ... are an altogether admirable series,’ which ought to be ‘of great value to farmers.’ The illustrations were normally limited to tabulated data and photographs or line drawings designed to instruct the reader, but No. 26 proudly presented the Bulletins as authoritative, attractive, and readable. Based on advice ‘prepared by practical and scientific authorities’ for the Ministry, they are, as the ‘Johne’s Disease’ cover note put it, ‘attractively produced and printed in good type’ and ‘their appearance is altogether pleasant’.

Thanks to occasional adverts for products such as sheep dips, feeds, supplements, rat poison, and farm insurance products etc. in some of them, we can see that MAFF subsidised these high-value production costs through advertising revenue. So, it was possible to write off to the Ministry for them postage free with a small cover charge enclosed (8d. for ‘Poultry Keeping on the General Farm’; 6d. for ‘Manuring of Pastures for Meat and Milk’) as well as get them from booksellers. Readers knew to look out for the Bulletins from lists of similar publications printed on the back pages, or reading *Agriculture*, the Ministry’s monthly journal (subscription around 6s. p.a.). But MAFF also distributed their Bulletins and Advisory Leaflets at county agricultural fairs – something that I have seen while watching their advisory films for the current FIELD research project. Determined to encourage farmers to contact them, they lingered on slow panning shots of the literature, their helpful staff chatting to farm families and handing them material from their stands. It’s unknown how many were printed, distributed or sold (as is often the way with ephemera, we are frequently left with very few underpinning records), but there were certainly sufficient produced for them to remain relatively easily found, cheaply, used!

The Ministry (which used its leaflets to disseminate research findings and legal information to producers quickly), believed that the Bulletins were the best way for it to stay in touch with farmers

and livestock owners. They had their limitations: MAFF advised stock owners to contact their veterinary surgeons to treat and control any illness detected after checking the latest print information. In the main the Bulletins were therefore conventional if well-designed examples of technical literature for specialist readers: farmers, farm workers, stock owners, professional (sometimes amateur) horticulturalists and growers. But *Wild Mammals* offered up something more and hoped to attract a much wider readership: those who sought a glimpse of country life. Lancum writes with passion in defence of agricultural production, the need to grow and protect food. But by pitching in critiques of medieval tales about hedgehogs spiking apples and eggs with their prickles, or the joy of watching playful otters, he clearly expects his audience to be more familiar with the pleasures of wildlife than farming.

*Wild Mammals* could be bought for 2s. 6d. (nb the Agricultural Wages Boards set agricultural adult male wages at just under 100s. 0d. at the time). Published as a companion volume to the successful Bulletin 140. *Wild Birds and the Land*, both were commissioned specifically for the general reader. The first, flagged as an ‘official publication’, answered the demand of ‘increased public interest in bird life’ (Foreword, *Birds*, 1950 edn.). Neither was a typical MAFF Bulletin, ‘confined to the economic aspect’, though that aspect was certainly visible, as we can see in the Foreword to *Mammals* which stated that ‘some of our mammals ... are among the worst pests with which the food producer has to cope. Against these, unremitting and relentless warfare is necessary, and in some instances effective control is a task of great difficulty.’



Title page of the 1947 Agriculture Act, one of several pieces of legislation impacting heavily on Ministry advice.

Throughout *Wild Mammals* we see this language of conflict, of tireless and exhausting action in defence of the national interest in the form of food production, but that sits alongside the language of reward for ‘naturalists’ who seek out rarities. Akin to propaganda films like *Tawney Pipit* (Prestige



Production, 1944), in which a rare bird protected against all depredation stands in for the defence of the land, the Bulletin 150 foreword continued to use combative themes that had been dominant in the Second World War. It nevertheless observed that some ‘wild mammals ... are beneficial and therefore worthy of encouragement and protection, ... As with the bird bulletin, this publication is not confined to the economic aspect but contains much that will interest the naturalist.’ These Bulletins were designed to represent the work and expertise of the Ministry, of its Advisors (represented by the author), and of farmers post-War. And given the evidence of their large photographic plates, layout and cover design, they evidently sought to position themselves in the same market place as publications like the pocketbook *The Observer’s Book of Wild Animals of the British Isles* first compiled by W. J. Stoke in 1938, or Macmillan’s more lavish 231-page *Wild Animals in Britain: Mammals, reptiles and amphibians* by Oliver Gregory Pike (1950).

What *Mammals* therefore conveys (like the more technical post-War MAFF leaflets and Bulletins) is something of the effort involved in making and maintaining the agricultural landscape, the landscape as a site of peace-time food production, as established by the Agriculture Act (1947). And that that productive landscape is simultaneously interwoven with the period’s increasing interest in the natural world, and in the countryside, represented by the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act (1949). Often perceived as being in tension, in sum these Acts, I would argue, placed the countryside at the service of the newly-imagined nation post-War: the nation of Reconstruction, the Festival of Britain, BBC Radio’s *The Archers* and the nation that being captured by The MERL as it travelled the Agricultural Shows. With its occasional pot-shot as those who were unfortunately ignorant of the damage caused by pests, balanced alongside pleasurable recounting of catching shy animals going quietly about their day, and nuggets of country lore, the *Wild Mammals Bulletin* is a document in which we can see this synthesis shaping up: the necessary husbanding of resources for food production; the countryside accessible for healthful, rational amenity.

## Further Reading:

**For more about Karen and her work** – [https://research.leedstrinity.ac.uk/en/persons/karen-sayer\(5c5fb33f-b15c-497f-870a-ad1d04f03454\).html](https://research.leedstrinity.ac.uk/en/persons/karen-sayer(5c5fb33f-b15c-497f-870a-ad1d04f03454).html); <https://twitter.com/ProfKarenSayer>

**For more about the FIELD research project** – <https://field-wt.co.uk/about/>

**For more on Professor Karen Sayer’s Fellowship** – <https://merl.reading.ac.uk/news-and-views/2015/11/explore-your-archive-rats-in-the-archives/>

**For more details of the MERL Library, as held at The MERL** – <https://merl.reading.ac.uk/collections/ministry-for-agriculture-fisheries-and-food-library-maff/>

For more details of the MERL Archive, as held at The MERL – <https://merl.reading.ac.uk/collections/ministry-of-agriculture-fisheries-and-food/>