

Endangered hazel dormice to get first ever dedicated railway crossing

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Engineers are building a tiny railway crossing for wild hazel dormice in a bid to save the endangered species from extinction.

The new 'dormouse bridge' will be the first of its kind on the railway when it's built next summer on the Furness line* in Lancashire.

Wild hazel dormice have declined by a staggering 51% since 2000**. This project aims to tackle that decline by establishing new dormouse populations in Lancashire but the selected sites are currently separated by the rail route in Morecambe Bay.

The new mouse-sized climbing frame over tracks will connect populations, encouraging them to find food, look for a new mate or find better nesting sites in the Arnside and Silverdale Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

It's a move by Network Rail and wildlife charity People's Trust for Endangered Species (PTES) to increase dormice numbers in this part of England.

The £40,000 conservation project involves fitting a 12-metre long shielded tree-top structure to provide protection from predators on the side of an existing railway overbridge.

Network Rail teams are currently working with the 'dormouse bridge' manufacturer Animex on the best way to attach it.

Ecologists are also looking at how to improve the railway embankment to encourage dormice to use the new bridge to safely move from one side of the railway to the other.

Rory Kingdon, senior sponsor from Network Rail, said: "We're delighted to be contributing £40,000 to this dormouse bridge over the Furness line to encourage the breeding of hazel dormice populations in danger of extinction, so they have a fighting chance to thrive for generations to come.

"Network Rail is committed to improve biodiversity and protect habitats for the future. In fact, this work directly aligns to a major aim of the recent COP26 summit in Glasgow - to protect the natural environment and contribute to the conservation of nature."

Ian White, dormouse and training officer at PTES, said: "This year dormice made a welcome return to Lancashire when we reintroduced 30 individuals to the Arnside and Silverdale Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. This new population has got off to an excellent start as we know at least twelve litters were born this year.

"PTES' annual reintroduction brings dormice back into areas where they once lived, and we hope that this new bridge will enable two neighbouring populations to create a local metapopulation in the area, which will really to help bring this rare and beautiful species back from the brink."

Loss of quality woodland habitat is one of the main reasons for their decline, so it is hoped that this new bridge will ensure a successful future for dormice in Lancashire.

To read more about Network Rail's environmental commitments visit:

www.networkrail.co.uk/sustainability/

To read more about the rail industry's We Mean Green campaign visit:

www.networkrail.co.uk/stories/we-mean-green/

*The Furness Line is a popular commuter and tourist route that boasts stunning views of Morecambe Bay. It's also regularly used by freight trains that serve the economically important industries on the Cumbrian Coast line.

**Wild hazel dormice have declined by a staggering 51% since 2000 and has disappeared from 17 counties in England, according to PTES' *State of Britain's Dormice 2019* report.

Photo credit: Network Rail

Video credit: Lorna Griffiths