



Press release

The last spiny dormouse in Europe

Team from the Senckenberg Centre for Human Evolution and Palaeoenvironment at the University of Tübingen finds 11.6 million year old evidence of the rodent at the Hammerschmiede clay pit

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Very few know of them, fewer still have seen them in their natural environment, not least because today only one species of the spiny dormouse survives, in southern India. However, the oldest spiny dormouse in evolutionary history, a member of the rodent family, was found in sediment dating back 17.5 to 13.3 million years in Europe. Now, Professor Madelaine Böhme of the Senckenberg Centre for Human Evolution and Palaeoenvironment at the University of Tübingen and Dr. Jérôme Prieto of the University of Munich together with their team have uncovered evidence of a more-recent spiny dormouse in Europe from only 11.6 million years ago: their discovery, an upper molar, was found at the Hammerschmiede clay pit in the Allgäu region of southern Germany. This site became famous worldwide following the discovery of two anthropoid ape species, *Danuvius guggenmosi*, which walked upright, and the smallest known anthropoid ape *Buronijs manfredschmiedi*. News of the discovery of the last known spiny dormouse in Europe has been published in the academic journal *Fossil Imprint*.

Known as the spiny dormouse, this family of rodents (Platacanthomyidae) got its name from the only species still living, the spiny dormouse (*Platacanthomys lasiurus*) of southern India, whose bushy tail looks spiny. "The rarity of the spiny dormouse is explained by its habitat and its unusual way of life. The spiny dormice of southern India and the only other living subspecies, the Chinese pygmy dormouse (*Typhlomys*), live deep in leaf litter or high up in trees in hard-to-reach mountainous forests at heights up to more than 3,000 meters," reports Madelaine Böhme. They are also nocturnal. "The pygmy dormice found in China and Vietnam are – alongside bats – the only land mammals in the world that use echolocation for orientation," she adds.

University of Tübingen
Public Relations Department

Christfried Dornis
Director

Janna Eberhardt
Research reporter
Phone +49 7071 29-77853
janna.eberhardt[at]uni-tuebingen.de

presse[at]uni-tuebingen.de
www.uni-tuebingen.de/aktuell

Senckenberg Nature Research Society
Press Office

Sabine Wilke
Director

Judith Jördens
Press & Social Media
Phone +49 69 7542 1434
judith.joerdens[at]senckenberg.de

pressestelle[at]senckenberg.de
www.senckenberg.de/presse

A rarity

Spiny dormice are also a rarity in the Hammerschmiede location, says Böhme. This is evident from the discovery of the tooth being only one among roughly 5,000 teeth from other rodents that have been found in the clay pit. “The habitat preserved in the Hammerschmiede, lowlands with meandering rivers, was certainly not optimal for the spiny dormouse,” explains the researcher, “because European spiny dormice of the *Neocometes* genus have until now only been found in large numbers in rocky or mountainous habitats, such as the Franconian Alb mountains or the slopes of the largest Central European stratovolcano, the Vogelsberg.”

This evidence of the spiny dormouse increases the number of species of vertebrates known from the Hammerschmiede to 158. The 90 types of mammal include rodents with 27 proven species, making them almost as diverse as the 30 species of carnivores that have been counted. To date it is not known why there is such extraordinarily high biodiversity, however this will be researched in detail within the scope of the Tübingen Cluster of Excellence TERRA (Terrestrial Geo-Biosphere Interactions in a Changing World) which launched in 2026.

The Hammerschmiede

The University of Tübingen and the Senckenberg Centre for Human Evolution and Palaeoenvironment, led by Professor Madelaine Böhme, have been undertaking scientific excavations of the pit at Pforzen in the Allgäu region since 2011. Since 2017 they have involved members of the public as part of a citizen science project and since 2020 have received financial support from the Free State of Bavaria. Roughly 40,000 fossils of 158 species of vertebrates have so far been found, including the two anthropoid apes *Danuvius guggenmosi* and *Buroni* *manfredschmid*.



Artist's reconstruction of a spiny dormouse in the wetlands of the Hammerschmiede – design: Peter Nickolaus – inset shows the upper molar – just 1.4 millimeters long – of *Neocometes brunonis*, the last member of the rodent family of spiny dormice from Europe.

Publication:

Madelaine Böhme, Jérôme Prieto: The last European *Neocometes* (Rodentia: Platacanthomyidae) from the early Late Miocene hominid locality of Hammerschmiede (Germany). *Fossil Imprint*, <https://doi.org/10.37520/fi.2025.007>

Contact:

Prof. Dr. Madelaine Böhme
University of Tübingen
Senckenberg Centre for Human Evolution and Palaeoenvironment
Phone +49 7071 29-73191
[m.boehme\[at\]ifg.uni-tuebingen.de](mailto:m.boehme@ifg.uni-tuebingen.de)