LANDESAMT FÜR UMWELT,
LANDWIRTSCHAFT
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Freistaat
SACHSEN

LIFE4HamsterSaxony

Common hamster conservation that works with agriculture.



ZOO LEIPZIG
On nature's trail.

Landkreis Nordsachsen

Life 4
Hamster
Saxony

A project developed through a strong network

In response to the dramatic decline in common hamster populations, the working group "Cooperative common hamster conservation in the Free State of Saxony" was established in 2008. This expert group includes representatives of public authorities, the agricultural sector, environmental organisations, common hamster specialists, and Zoo Leipzig.



Members of the working group, Photo: Zoo Leipzig

The continuing decline of the common hamster population also prompted the working group to initiate the preparation of an EU LIFE project proposal. The proposal was prepared by the Saxon State Office for the Environment, Agriculture and Geology (LfULG), Zoo Leipzig and the Lower Nature Conservation Authority of the North Saxony district. Following approval by the European Union, the LIFE4HamsterSaxony project was launched in October 2025.

The EU LIFE Programme

LIFE Nature and Biodiversity forms part of the EU-wide LIFE funding programme, which supports measures in the fields of biodiversity, environmental protection, climate action, and energy transition. This area of funding is aimed primarily at the conservation of species and habitats of Community importance as well as biodiversity. The programme supports the establishment and management of the European Natura 2000 network of protected areas and the implementation of the EU Biodiversity Strategy.

Co-funded by the European Union

NATURA 2000

Find out more about the project:
feldhamster.sachsen.de/en

Life 4 Hamster Saxony

What we aim to achieve – a secure future for the common hamster

1. Establishment of a self-sustaining, continually growing, **healthy** and **genetically diverse common hamster population** in north-west Saxony.
2. **Restoration of sustainable common hamster habitats** through innovative, climate-resilient arable farming to create suitable conditions for a self-sustaining population.
3. Establishment of a conservation breeding programme to create a **reserve population** for reinforcement measures.
4. Expansion of **region-specific expertise** and knowledge transfer on common hamster ecology, common hamster-friendly arable farming, and the impacts of climate change in order to optimise conservation, development, and conservation measures.
5. Promotion of **engagement** in and **acceptance** of measures to protect the common hamster.



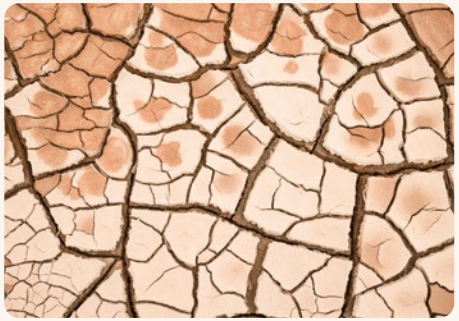
Young common hamster in the breeding station, Photo: Zoo Leipzig



Young common hamster protected from birds of prey by protective mesh, Photo: Zoo Leipzig

Strictly protected and critically endangered

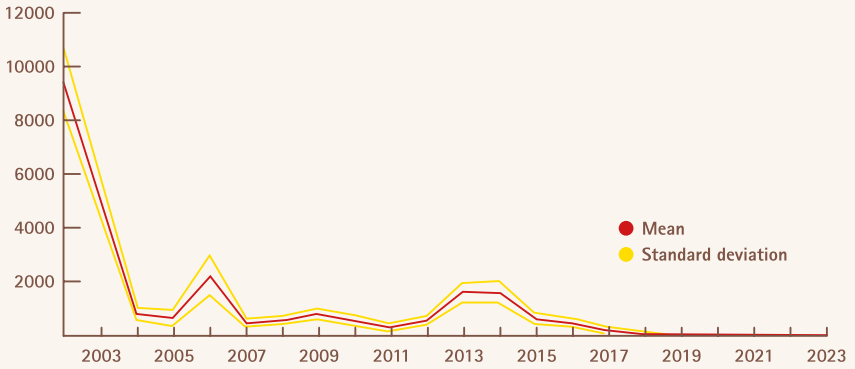
Once widespread and long considered an agricultural pest, the common hamster is now one of the most critically endangered mammal species in Germany. Some of its remaining populations are highly isolated and continue to experience dramatic declines. Since 2020, even the last remaining populations in north-west Saxony have fallen below the detection threshold.



Drought causes soils to crack and reduces their long-term capacity to absorb and retain water.
Photo: Nature Conservation Archive, LfULG, A. Erdbeer

The ongoing decline of common hamster populations is driven by a range of factors, most of them human-induced. These include the sealing and fragmentation of habitats, agricultural intensification and, more recently, climate change. Without active intervention, the species is likely to disappear from the agricultural landscapes of Saxony.

Common hamster population in Saxony

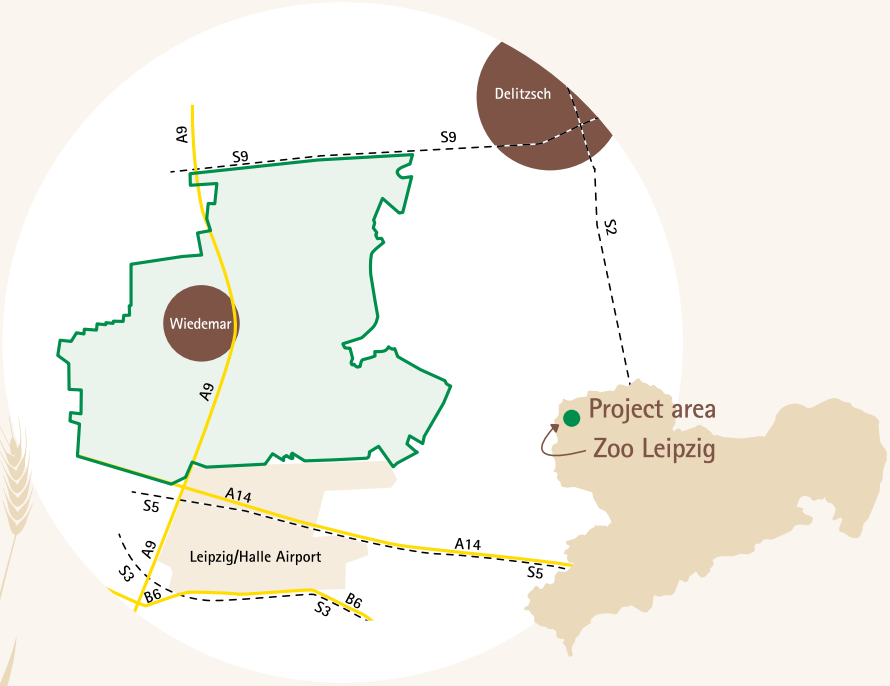


The project region near Leipzig

The project area is characterised by arable farming and extends around the municipality of Wiedemar in north-west Saxony. This area, which extends from south-west of Delitzsch to the border with Saxony-Anhalt, once supported Saxony's last common hamster population across approx. 68 km^2.

The deep loess soils found in this region provide ideal habitat for the common hamster and are highly valued by farmers for their exceptional fertility. This inevitably gives rise to a conflict between the interests of agriculture and those of the common hamster and makes the project ideally placed to generate pioneering insights into species conservation within modern farming systems. A land-use concept based on common hamster-friendly farming practices is intended to create a network of suitable habitats.

The European Special Protection Area "Agrarraum und Bergbaufolgelandschaft bei Delitzsch", which lies within the project area, will also benefit from this approach.



More than just a farmland species – how the common hamster shapes ecosystems

The common hamster *(Cricetus cricetus)* is a typical inhabitant of steppes and agricultural landscapes. With its distinctive coat pattern, it is one of the most colourful mammal species in Europe. Its characteristic features include the construction of complex burrow systems, preferably in deep loess or clay soils, and the storing of food for hibernation.

As part of arable ecosystems, the common hamster plays an important role by mixing and aerating the soil and creating habitats for other soil-dwelling organisms. The common hamster also enriches the food web of other protected species such as the red kite *(Milvus milvus)*.

Conservation measures for the common hamster also indirectly benefit arable ecosystems, as the adopted farming practices provide habitat for many other animal and plant species, including the skylark *(Alauda arvensis)* and grey partridge *(Perdix perdix)*, as well as rare arable wildflowers. As a result, biodiversity in these areas increases substantially.



The corn bunting *(Emberiza calandra)* is one species that benefits from the biodiversity promoted through common hamster-friendly farming practices. Photo: Nature Conservation Archive, LfULG, A. Erdbeer



Strip cropping to create optimal habitat for the common hamster, Photo: Zoo Leipzig

Close cooperation with agriculture as the key to success

Because collaboration with farmers in the region is essential to the implementation of the project, the project team maintains an ongoing dialogue with them.

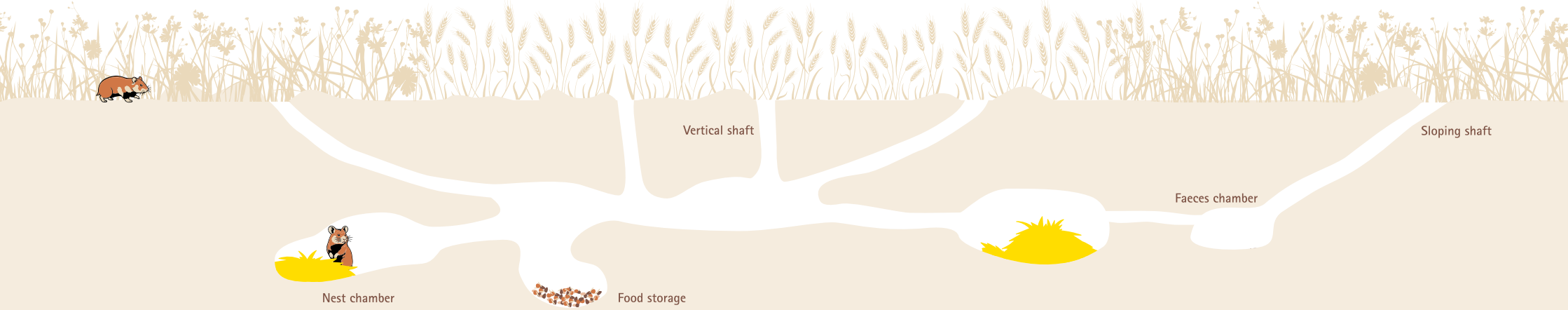
In addition to established common hamster conservation measures (e.g. strip cropping, delayed stubble cultivation and flower strips), innovative measures are being developed and planned in collaboration with farmers. These include testing climate-resilient crops, alternative cultivation strategies, and new approaches to the use of agricultural machinery. To support implementation, a land-use concept is being developed to strategically distribute permanent core areas and, in some cases, rotational connecting areas across the project area in order to create a network of common hamster-friendly habitats.



Common hamster-friendly strip cropping with cereals and a flower strip, Photo: Zoo Leipzig

Each year, common hamsters are released on selected sites considered particularly suitable. Specific measures are put in place to protect them from predators. To support this, the project includes a common hamster breeding programme at Zoo Leipzig.

The outcomes and success of the conservation measures and reinforcements are documented through a comprehensive scientific monitoring programme. This includes the regular surveying of burrow systems, the analysis of movement patterns using telemetry, and the use of camera traps.



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