



Water Voles and their habitat.

Introduction

The water vole was once a familiar sight on waterways and ponds throughout England. Sadly, it has suffered one of the most catastrophic declines of any British mammal this century and its widespread survival is now seriously threatened.

This decline has been most rapid in the last 30 years with a recent survey showing that species had been lost from almost 90% of the sites where it occurred earlier this century. Remaining populations are very fragmented and their survival is in doubt.

Legislation

Since 1998 the Water Vole has received legal protection through the inclusion of Schedule 5A of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981(as amended) in respect of section 9(4) only. This section of the Act protects the water voles place of shelter or protection, but does not protect the voles themselves. The water vole has received this limited protection in recognition of this significant decline that this species has undergone in recent decades and also in recognition that habitat loss and destruction has played a much greater part in this decline than direct persecution.

Legal protection makes it an offence to intentionally or recklessly:
 damage, destroy or obstruct access to any structure or place which water voles use for shelter or protection;
 disturb water voles while they are using such a place
 Offences carry a maximum penalty of imprisonment for up to 6 months or a fine of up to £5,000, or both.

It is not the intention of the law to prevent all development or maintenance works in areas occupied by water voles. However, their legal protection does require that adequate attention is paid to their presence and appropriate actions are taken to safeguard the places they use for protection and shelter.

Reasons for the decline of the Water Vole.

Disturbance of Riparian Habitats.
 Many water courses have been damaged by expansion of urban areas, and can be damaged further by construction processes. Intensification of agriculture and dredging works. Reprofiling of banks may leave them unsuitable for burrow formation.



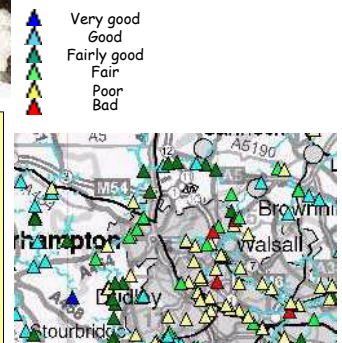
Predation by Mink.
 The introduction of American Mink is now widespread in Britain.




Fragmentation and Isolation of Habitats and Populations.
 Water voles live in localised groups. The removal of bankside vegetation with increased predation results in isolated communities which are unable to colonise other areas leading to local extinction.



Deterioration of Water Quality and Quantity.
 Climatic factors together with increased abstraction reduces water flow. Water quality has been consistently reduced by many pollutants.



<p>Local Wildlife Trust www.wildlifetrusts.org</p>	<p>Works or proposals on river banks - Local Environment Agency Office - www.environment-agency.gov.uk</p>	<p>Derek A Whitcher Badger & Vole Consultant Cliff Edge Cliff Road Darfield Barnsley S73 9HR Tel - 01226 753271 Fax - 01226 270993 Email - derek@badgersandwatervoles.co.uk</p>
<p>English Nature - Local Office or Northminster House Peterborough PE1 1UA Tel - 01733 455000 Fax - 01733 568834 www.english-nature.org.uk</p>	<p>Contacts</p>  <p>Work or proposals affecting canal banks - British Waterways Environmental & Scientific Services Llanthony Warehouse, Gloucester Dock, Gloucester GL1 2BJ</p>	

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The water vole is a very shy creature, requiring a great deal of cover around its burrows and over its runs. However the following information provides some very basic field identification guidelines. If the presence of water voles is suspected an experienced surveyor should be called in to confirm their presence and advise on what action to take - (See contacts).
Water Voles are not usually active during the winter months, signs of their presence are usually only visible during Spring and Summer.

Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec
Avoid damaging habitat			Best times to work in areas with water voles						Avoid damaging habitat		
Best surveying time											

Water vole year planner

Water Vole droppings



Droppings

- Most distinctive field sign.
- 8-12mm long and 4-5 mm wide.
- Cylindrical with blunt ends.
- Colour is variable between Green, Brown and Black.
- Generally odourless (may have a musty smell)

Feeding Stations

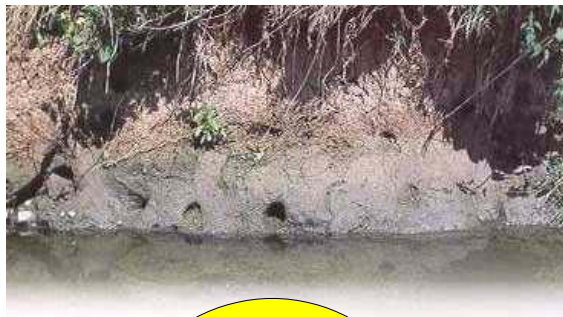
- Water Voles often bring pieces of cut vegetation to favoured feeding stations close to the waters edge.
- Look out for small neat piles of chopped food remains with the piece about 8mm in length.

Feeding Station



Burrows

- Typically wider than they are high.
- Diameter generally 4-8 cm.
- Normally within 2-3 m of the water.
- Some burrow entrances open below the waterline.

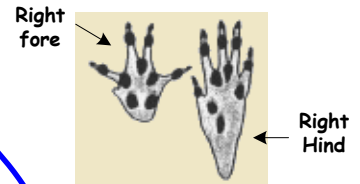


Top Tip.
More often than not you will hear a Water Vole rather than see it. Listen out for a distinctive 'plop' as it launches itself into the water.

Lawns

During the breeding season when the females are heavily pregnant they don't venture very far from the burrows. This grazing around the edge of the burrows leads to the development of lawns.

Water Vole footprint.



Prints

- The forefoot has 4 toes which leave a distinctive star shaped pattern.
- The hind foot has five toes with the 1st and 5th toes leaving prints almost at right angles to the 3 central toes.

Latrines

- Latrines are used to mark range boundaries or favoured spots close to burrows.
- The majority of droppings are deposited at Latrine sites.
- They consist of a flattened / trampled mass of old droppings topped with fresh ones.
- They are typically maintained between February & November.



The Water Vole and its field signs can easily be confused with the Brown Rat, the following hints may help to reduce confusion...

Burrows	Rat burrows are larger (8-10cm) in size with a fan shaped spoil heap outside, connected by well trodden runs.
Latrines	These are scattered along the runs, or deposited away from the waters edge.
Droppings	Rat droppings are larger than Water Vole droppings and always have a very unpleasant odour.