



Water Vole information pack.

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Photo © Neil Cox

The once common water vole (*Arvicola amphibius*) is believed to have suffered a decline in excess of 97% throughout its former British range. Although population estimates in 2002 indicated a surviving population of 1.2 million it is a rapidly declining species and current figures suggest a national breeding population of around 400,000 individuals. They are currently believed to be Britain's fastest declining mammal. Historic records testify that water voles were formerly a widespread species in Cornwall. The Victoria County Histories in 1906 record them as being "common in all suitable habitats throughout the county". The Vincent Wildlife Trusts 1989-90 National Water Vole Survey recorded water voles at a single site on the River Bude although no latrines (piles of droppings developed as territorial markers) were found. The Environmental Records Centre for Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly has compiled a list of water vole records dating back to the 1960's. These demonstrate a historic distribution which was countywide.

“Cornwall’s water vole population is now facing a promising future thanks to the efforts of our team”

Neil Cox - Trustee



Water voles are Britain’s largest vole species. They are adapted to life in a water edge environment where their swimming ability allows them to both forage effectively amongst semi-emergent plant life and to avoid predators by “plopping” off the river bank and swimming away.

The twenty two and a half acres of Bude Marsh is managed by Cornwall Council’s countryside department. A stated aim of the LNR management plan (2008 -2013) is to investigate the possibility of re-introducing water voles to the reserve. A mink survey - bridge checks for droppings or footprints and rafts to check wider distribution - was undertaken in the summer of 2012. No field signs of the species have been identified. Bude Marsh and its surrounding river systems - the River Neet, River Strat and Bude Canal - provide a complexity of riparian habitat which is capable of supporting a substantial water vole population. This is the only project of its type in Cornwall where water voles are now believed to be completely extinct.

Surveying.



By carrying out surveys we can assess the spread of the releases we’ve already carried out and ensure the success of the overall project. We intend to continue this process into the future in order to obtain a long term picture of how successful this project has been and to ensure the continued survival of the water vole.

Recognition.

Often confused with brown rats, water voles have very small rounded ears and a furry tail whilst rats have large ears and a bald tail. Water voles also have a blunt nose, unlike the pointed nose of a rat. Their coats are of a rich chestnut brown colour. Water voles have orange teeth, whilst rats have white.



Water vole habitat.



They typically live in burrow systems that they excavate in the banks of rivers, ditches, ponds and streams. The suitability of these are dependent on the height of the bank for burrowing, safety from fluctuating water levels and the availability of food. Long varying types

of vegetation are key to water voles habitat for feeding, cover and also making nests. Excessive shading from trees are not favoured as they slow the growth of vegetation below.

Burrows.



Found in the banks of rivers and streams these are typically 4-8cm in diameter and are wider than they are taller. Nesting chambers are found within their burrows, however, ball nests can be found above ground – they consist of grasses and reeds. They are known to have a number of burrow entrances above and below the water line.



Latrines.

These are piles of droppings that water voles use as a mark of their territories whilst breeding. They are typically found on rocks and small areas extending from the bank-side. They generally consist of a dark green / brown / black colouring. Approximately 8-12mm long and 4-5mm wide with blunt ends, similar to tic tacs. They have no odour. Field vole droppings tend to be smaller and look similar to hundreds and thousands.



Lawns.

Burrows will typically have a 'mown' lawn around them. These occur when females breed and want to feed without straying away from their nests.



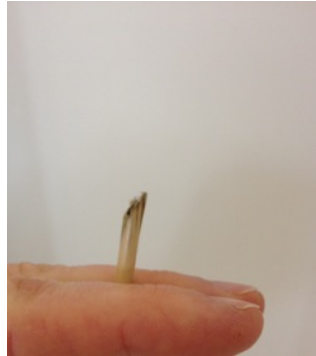
Footprints.

The front feet are star shaped with four toes each. The back feet have five toes each. Surprisingly they are not webbed. From heel to claw they measure 26-34mm.



Feeding stations.

Water voles sit on their haunches as they eat. The cut vegetation they leave as a stock pile are about 6-10cm in length and with a distinctive 45° angle.



When looking for water voles try and look for a variety of signs including latrines, and a high density of cut vegetation. Quite often you will find pieces of cut vegetation but they

can also be cut by field voles, these will however be shorter at 2-5cm in length.

Predators.

The American Mink is the main predator to the water vole, the female mink will seek out colonies when hunting. In the future it is likely that water voles will only survive where populations are supported by active human intervention. This support will be to principally ensure the provision of suitable habitats and to control or eliminate predation by non-native North American Mink (*Neovision vison*). The reintroduction of water voles into habitats which are highly suitable and where strategic mink control on a catchment based level is practicable is therefore a recommended component of the species national conservation strategy.



Careful monitoring for the presence of mink is carried out using purpose designed mink rafts. They encourage mink to leave evidence of their presence in the form of footprints. A standard mixture of clay and sand records the tracks over a period of 1 -2 weeks. This tray is positioned within the tunnel and therefore protected from the elements.

This project has been funded by Biffa Award, a multi-million pound fund that helps to build communities and transform lives through awarding grants to community and environmental projects across the UK (www.biffa-award.org).

Supported by