

Water Vole

Arvicola terrestris



Description

The Water Vole is the largest of the British voles with a head and body measuring around 20cm. Water Voles inhabit the banks of slow-flowing rivers, streams and ditches as well as still water such as lakes, ponds and dykes. Their presence can be determined by searching for their burrows at and above water level, together with characteristic piles of droppings (latrines) and feeding remains.

The famous 'Ratty' from *Wind in the Willows* is a Water Vole. Despite that name, they are not rats and they suffer from much unfair persecution when mistaken as such. Water Voles are one of the easiest mammals to see in the wild. They need suitable habitat in close proximity to allow populations to expand and recolonise areas. Water Voles also need areas to retreat to in the event of flooding. Water Voles do not hibernate, but remain in their burrows for much of the winter with a food store.

As the lower reaches of rivers become unsuitable for habitation, the distribution of Water Voles becomes discontinuous and existing sites become isolated and vulnerable.

National Status

The Water Vole is found throughout Britain with strongholds in lowland areas near water. Once common and widespread, this species has suffered a significant decline in numbers and distribution. A national survey in 1989–90 failed to find signs of Voles in 67% of sites where they were previously recorded. A recent population estimate based on the number of latrines found suggested a total Great Britain pre-breeding population of 1,200,000 animals.

Local Status

Within the Barnsley area the main areas which still contain this species are the Rivers Dove and Dearne, with parts of the remaining Barnsley canal system and also the tributaries of the River Don. Unfortunately, Mink are moving into these areas, increasing the threat to remaining populations.

Legal Status

In 1998 they received limited protection under the Wildlife and Countryside Act, 1981. It is now an offence to damage, destroy or obstruct access to any place which Water Voles use for shelter or protection.

Links with other Action Plans

- HAP3 Wet Woodland
- HAP7 Floodplain Grazing Marsh
- HAPI1 Upland Heathland
- HAPI4 Reedbeds
- HAPI5 Ponds
- HAPI6 Rivers

Current Factors Causing Loss or Decline

- Loss of suitable bank side habitats as a result of engineering, bank side development or over-zealous vegetation clearance.
- Population fragmentation: increasingly, populations are being isolated by new roads, canalisation, development and loss of habitat.
- Water level fluctuations: Water Voles need slow water level fluctuations or refuge areas to retreat to when water levels rise quickly.
- Predation: the spread of non-native Mink throughout the UK has significantly increased the severe decline in Water Vole numbers.

- Pollution: contamination of water by pesticides, heavy metals, slurry and sewage may have contributed to the decline.
- Poisoning: indirect poisoning of Water Voles by Brown Rat poison.

Current Local Action

- A national survey for Water Vole was conducted by the Vincent Wildlife Trust in 1989–90.
- Yorkshire Wildlife Trust has an Otter and Rivers project covering South Yorkshire.
- Some Water Vole surveys in the Dearne Valley
- Occasional recording at various sites

Proposed Local Action

- Survey potential Water Vole sites away from the Dearne and Don where past surveys have been completed.
- Carry out a review of the Water Vole population in Barnsley at established and possible new sites, including the collation of previous surveys of both Thurlstone and Langsett Moors and the Dearne Valley.
- Identify new potential sites for wetland creation as part of flood defence strategy works/aggregate extraction etc. with a view to reducing the distance between existing populations and creating offline habitats and refuges from Mink and regular inundation.
- Promote leaflets on Mink trapping to landowners in the uplands and other targeted areas.

BMBC Planning Policy Actions

- Include habitat and species protection policies in development plans and/or supplementary guidance.
- Ensure that the habitats occupied by Water Voles are given an appropriate level of protection in local plans and designate all Water Vole sites as Natural Heritage Sites (NHS).

BMBC Development Control Actions

- Ensure that Barnsley MBC planning officers are aware of legislation requirements concerning Water Voles (enhanced protection under the Wildlife and Countryside Act) and

that all developments near known sites take full account of Water Vole requirements.

- Ensure that all planning applications are adequately assessed in relation to their impact on Water Vole sites, that loss or damage to these is avoided and that opportunities for enhancement or creation of appropriate Water Vole habitats are maximised.
- On land owned by public or conservation bodies, ensure that management maintains and, where possible, enhances Water Vole habitat and consideration is given to restoration and creation of Water Vole habitats.
- Consider the impact on Water Voles when assessing planning applications.
- Take opportunities through the planning system to restore or create Water Vole habitats and explore possibilities of long-term management agreements.
- Avoid damage to actual or potential Water Vole habitat caused by culverting, channelisation, sheet piling, and flood defence work wherever possible, and explore opportunities for restoring watercourses to a more natural structure.

BMBC Land Ownership and Management Actions

- Look for appropriate opportunities to create Water Vole breeding habitat on Barnsley MBC countryside sites.
- Seek to control Mink on all Barnsley MBC owned sites.