



WATER VOLE

Arvicola terrestris

1. INTRODUCTION

Made famous as 'Ratty' in "The Wind in the Willows", the water vole is now the most threatened land mammal in the UK. The largest of our voles, in the UK it is primarily associated with slow-flowing rivers, streams, ponds, lakes and canals.

Water voles are vegetarian, favouring luxuriant marginal / emergent plants and bankside grasses and sedges (although they will eat tree bark, roots and berries in the winter).



© English Nature

Water voles live in colonies, with individuals establishing territories along the banks. They inhabit burrow systems dug into the banks. One of the key indicators of the species' presence are their burrow entrances which can generally be found throughout the bank and below the water line. Other indicative field signs include droppings / latrines (marking territories) and feeding remains.

Once a common sight in the county, the water vole is now very much on the brink of extinction.

2. OUR OBJECTIVES & TARGETS

Target

- | | |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| <p>A. Maintain the size of all populations known to be remaining in the sub-region in 2001-2.</p> <p>B. Increase population size and range by promoting expansion in the vicinity of existing key populations in the sub-region (i.e. in and around Coventry, Nuneaton and headwaters flowing off the Cotswold Hills).</p> | <p>2002-2015</p> <p>by 2010</p> |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|

ASSOCIATED HABITAT PLANS

- Rivers & Streams
- Canals
- Reedbeds

ASSOCIATED SPECIES PLANS

- Otter

3. NATIONAL BAP OBJECTIVES & TARGETS

- *Maintain the current distribution and abundance of the species in the UK.*
- *Ensure that water voles are present throughout their 1970s range by the year 2010, considering habitat management and possible translocation of populations to areas from where they have been lost.*

4. CURRENT STATUS

Once common and widespread in lowland England, the water vole (*Arvicola terrestris*) has suffered an accelerating decline in numbers and distribution throughout the last century. The most recent national survey, completed in 1998, showed a 67.5% loss in occupied sites and an 88% decline in population in only seven years.

The results of surveys in Warwickshire reflect the national trend (Jones, 2001). The main meta-population in the county survives as a number of fragmented colonies in the Coventry / Nuneaton area (on the Rivers Sowe and Anker and their tributaries, plus the Coventry Canal). With the exception of a couple of isolated colonies recorded elsewhere, the water vole appears to have all but disappeared from the rest of the county.

4.1 Legal and Policy Status

The water vole is only given limited protection in the UK, under Schedule 5 of the Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981, in respect of section 9(4) (i.e. protecting the burrows only). [Note that the case for full protection under the Act is currently under review.]

4.2 Current Factors Affecting The Species

- **Loss and fragmentation of habitat** – many stretches of river, due to development and intensive / inappropriate land management and river maintenance practices, have lost the bank structure and / or vegetation favoured by water voles.
- **Predation** - primarily by the now widespread mink (*Mustela vison*) which has escaped from commercial mink farms.
- **Disturbance** of colonies through both bankside and water-based activities.
- **Poor water quality** and continued pollution incidents in some watercourses.
- **Poisoning** through mistaken identity and inappropriate use of rodenticides.

5. CURRENT LOCAL ACTION

- Much of the work for water voles in Warwickshire is undertaken through the Wildlife Trust's Water for Wildlife Project (which has a Project Officer covering the county), including:-

- Undertaking water vole surveys and monitoring.
 - Providing advice to landowners and managers, ensuring appropriate habitat management and promoting habitat creation.
 - Advising on mitigation related to developments.
 - Providing training and support to a volunteer network.
 - Raising awareness of the water vole through appropriate publicity.
- Other activities of benefit to the water vole include :-
 - The Environment Agency, through its regulatory responsibilities, promotes a wide range of enhancements, relating not only to habitat, but also water quality etc.
 - The administration of agri-environment schemes (particularly Countryside Stewardship) has improved the management of riparian / wetland habitats.
 - Partnerships such as the North Warwickshire Water Vole Partnership (led by Warwickshire Wildlife Trust) and the Leam Project (led by FWAG) promote appropriate consideration of conservation objectives.
 - Other organisations (e.g. Severn Trent Water and British Waterways) promote the Water Vole through appropriate working practices, the publication of corporate BAPs and the funding of projects.

6. PROPOSED LOCAL ACTIONS (some dates amended - Core Steering Group - Feb 2008)

ACTION	Lead	Partners	By	Meets objective
Policy & Legislation				
PL1. Ensure that all relevant policy is included in Local Planning Documents (see ODPM Planning Policy Statement PPS9) to safeguard and promote water voles and their habitat.	LBAPSG	EA NE NBBC SDC CCC	2002-2015	A
PL2. Consider the habitat requirements of water voles in the management agreements of agri-environment schemes.	NE	FWAG	2002-2015	A, B
Site / Species Safeguard & Management				
SM1. Where viable water vole populations are identified, ensure protection of sites through designation as SINCS.	WBRC	NBBC EA NE WWT SDC CCC WSP	2006	A
SM2. Ensure management agreements are sought for all sites designated as above.	WWT	NBBC SDC CCC EA	2005	A, B

SM3. Provide information and strong guidance regarding water vole populations in regard to all flood defence, river channel and canal management works and aim to ensure that works do not affect the integrity of water vole populations are carried out in accordance with best practice guidelines, and wherever possible enhance opportunities for re-colonisation of areas.	WWT	BW CCC EA FWAG LBAPSG LO NBBC SDC WSP NE	2002- 2015	A
SM4. Promote the expansion of existing populations through the sympathetic management and restoration of adjacent habitat. Provide habitat management / restoration advice for at least 50% of sites adjacent to water vole SINCS	WWT	EA BW LOs NBBC SDC CCC FWAG	2007	B
SM5. Establish an appropriate mink control programme to protect remaining water vole populations.	WWT	BW CCC EA FWAG LBAPSG LO NBBC SDC WSP	2003- 2015	A
SM6. Continue to raise awareness of the differences between brown rats and water vole and the threats posed to water voles by the use of rodenticides – circulate best practice guidance to all appropriate organisations.	WWT	NBBC SDC CCC	2004	A
Advisory				
A1. Provide advice to key groups, including landowners and managers and relevant authorities, with regard to 'Best Practice' management for the benefit of water voles.	WWT	EA FWAG	2002- 2015	A, B
Research & Monitoring				
RM1. Monitor remaining water vole populations on an annual basis.	WWT	EA NBBC SDC CCC	review in 2005	A
RM2. Survey all outstanding sites with historic records from the last 10 years.	WWT		2004	A
RM3. Develop and promote a system to actively encourage the reporting of sightings of water voles, to supplement formal surveys.	WWT	EA FWAG BW NBBC SDC CCC	2005	A

RM4. Establish a means of monitoring the effectiveness and success of habitat enhancements and mitigation works undertaken.	WWT	BW CCC EA FWAG LBAPSG LO NBBC SDC WSP	2006	A
Communication, Education & Publicity				
CP1. Using the local media, raise the profile of the water vole, and improve understanding of the issues affecting the species.	WWT	BW CCC EA FWAG LBAPSG LO NBBC SDC WSP NE	2002- 2015	A, B

Abbreviations: BW – British Waterways, CCC – Coventry City Council, EA - Environment Agency, NE – Natural England, FWAG – Farming & Wildlife Advisory Group, LBAPSG – Local Biodiversity Action Plan Steering Group, LO – Landowner, NBBC – Nuneaton & Bedworth Borough Council, SDC - Stratford District Council, WSP – Wildlife Sites Project, WWT – Warwickshire Wildlife Trust.

7. REFERENCES

Jones, M. (2001). *Water Vole Survey 2001 – The Distribution of the Water Vole in the Warwickshire Avon Catchment*. Unpublished (Warwickshire Wildlife Trust).

8. FURTHER INFORMATION (see separate **Links** web page for links to web sites)

UK Biodiversity Action Plan no. 115

Report by FWAG 2004: *Restoring Voles and Other Biodiversity to the Wider Countryside*. WildCRU, University of Oxford, South Parks Road, Oxford, OX1 3PS

Game Conservancy Trust (2004) Leaflet about mink control using GCT Mink Raft from advice@gct.org.uk. Other enquiries to Dr Jonathan Reynolds: 01425 652381.

Mersey Basin Campaign Co-ordinator: Paul Corner (0151 343 9869)

Staffordshire Wildlife Trust Water Vole Project (01889 880101)

Cumbria Wildlife Trust Water Vole Project (01539 816300) email: watervole@cumbriawildlifetrust.org.uk

RSPB (2007) '*Farm Wildlife Handbook*' from Publications, RSPB, Unit 17, St Martin's Business Centre, St Martin's Way, Bedford MK42 0LF, tel. 01234 263616 or email: publications@rspb.org.uk.

9. CONTACT

Peter Sanders, Warwickshire Wildlife Trust, Tel. 02476 302912