

The Cotswold Water Park Water Vole Recovery Project; Landscape Level Mink Control for Water Vole Conservation

**Gareth Harris, Biodiversity Officer, Cotswold Water Park Society
June 2006**

Introduction

The Water Vole, previously a common mammal found throughout the UK, is now our fastest declining mammal and now one of our rarest.

Water Vole populations in the UK have declined by a depressing 94% in the past few decades and indeed have become extinct in many parts of the country. Much of this is due to habitat loss and degradation. A considerable decline in Water Vole populations has been seen more recently however, due to predation by the American Mink.

The American Mink, introduced to the UK for fur farming, has, through accidental and deliberate releases, successfully colonised much of the British Countryside. And it is still spreading. The Mink has a devastating impact upon Water Voles, capable of completely eradicating entire colonies from large sections of river within a single breeding season.

The Position Statement of the UK Water Vole Recovery Project Steering Group, the national body set up to lead and encourage Water Vole conservation in the UK, is that *“unless action is taken to reduce the impact of mink it is possible that the Water Vole will become extinct over much of Britain in a few years”*.

With this in mind, several projects have been established to co-ordinate Water Vole recovery and increasingly this is including Mink control. The work established in the Cotswold Water Park, which began in 2002 in partnership with Wiltshire Wildlife Trust (as the North Wiltshire Water Vole Recovery Project) and also with Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust, was one of the first projects to be established in the country.

Water Vole Surveys & Mink Control

The project revolves around two key elements; the longer term measures include **habitat improvements and advice to landowners and reserve managers** to improve land management to benefit Water Voles. Shorter term measures (but measures that will need to be ongoing once initiated) include **Mink control**.

Key rivers targeted for Mink control are the River Churn (Cirencester to Cricklade), Swill Brook (Swillbrook Bridge to Ashton Keynes), River Thames (Somerford Keynes to Lechlade), Ampney Brook, Marston Meysey Brook and the Coln (Fairford to Thames). This equates to over 140 km of river.

Mink control is undertaken by a team of volunteers at various sites in the CWP, enabled by landowners across the CWP who provide access to rivers and trapping locations across their land. The work undertaken by the project would not be possible without the huge efforts of the volunteers nor the support of the lake and land owners. The Mink control is tightly co-ordinated by the Cotswold Water Park Society enabling efficient targeting of Mink control to areas where Mink are currently being recorded.

Every 2 years river surveys are undertaken by another team of volunteers to record the density and distribution of Water Voles (also recording other species such as Otter and Mink). The project aims to answer the question: Can Water Voles expand and recover their populations when assisted by tightly controlled and co-ordinated Mink trapping?

How do we trap Mink?

Mink are trapped using floating rafts developed by the Game Conservancy Trust. The floating raft is able to record signs of Mink (footprints are seen on pads of clay) using the river. Mink are extremely curious and will readily, if not always, explore objects floating in

the river channel. Once Mink are recorded using the raft, a live/cage trap is then added to the raft. Mink are usually trapped within a few days. Non-target species, such as Water Voles are rarely caught but are set free unharmed.

This method of trapping is extremely efficient and humane and has enabled the capture of over 100 Mink in the CWP since the project began in 2002.

Is it working?

Yes. The baseline surveys were undertaken in summer 2002 and Mink control was then initiated in October 2002. Water Vole surveys were repeated in May/June 2004 and showed a massive increase of Water Voles on the River Thames and the Swill Brook. Further increases in Water Vole distribution have also been noted during 2005, in particular on the River Churn. During 2006, further expansions are being recorded along the main River Thames between Cricklade and Lechlade, areas where Water Voles have not been seen in many years, if not decades.

The results are clearly showing that controlling Mink does help our Water Vole populations to recover. Indeed, the Cotswold Water Park is now one of the few areas in the UK where Water Voles are actually recovering.

Additional benefits?

Survey work undertaken at Swillbrook Lakes (a Wiltshire Wildlife Trust Reserve which is actually in Gloucestershire!!!) near Somerford Keynes, by the Reserve Warden Nick Adams, have indicated that breeding waterbird populations have sharply increased and are also fledgling more youngsters each year. Similar increases in breeding waterbird breeding success has been noted at other sites in the CWP.

Due to the volume of work being undertaken upon our rivers, the project also generate large volumes of data regarding our Otter populations. The link between Otters and Mink is inseparable since increasing Otter populations will tend to push Mink out of a given area, a factor that has certainly helped this project.

With tremendous thanks to all of the volunteer trappers, landowners and river surveyors for all of their hard work. Many thousands of hours of work (monitoring and trapping) are undertaken each year by these volunteers. Thanks also to Nick Adams, Reserve Warden of Swillbrook Lakes Reserve.

Thanks also to English Nature, Environment Agency, Wiltshire Wildlife Trust, Esmee Fairbairn Foundation and Lower Mill Estate for supporting this work.

For further information, or if you wish to help the project, please contact: Gareth Harris, Biodiversity Officer, Cotswold Water Park Society on 01285 861459 or email: Gareth.harris@waterpark.org.

References

Harris G 2002. An Analysis of Water Vole Distribution & Habitat in the Cotswold Water Park: Implications for species Management. MSc Thesis 2002. Cranfield University, Silsoe.

Reynolds J, Short M, Porteous T (2003). The GCT Mink Raft. Game Conservancy Trust.

Strachan C, Strachan R, Jefferies DJ, 2000; Preliminary Report in the Changes in the Water Vole population of Britain as shown by the National Surveys of 1989-90 and 1996-98. Vincent Wildlife Trust & JNCC.