

Mink control for water voles



Photograph by David Kjaer

American mink (*Neovison neovison*) have significantly contributed to the near extinction of water voles in Hertfordshire over the past 50 years. These non-native predators can wipe out a colony of water voles in a matter of months. However, if some areas are kept free or relatively free of mink then water voles could once again be a common sight on our rivers and wetlands.

WHAT IS MINK CONTROL?

Mink are associated with aquatic places and are commonly found in wooded and scrubby areas along rivers and streams. They are territorial with a females territory typically stretching 1.5km along the waterway from her breeding den.

This means that we can effectively target trapping efforts along rivers and streams. The most successful way of detecting the presence of mink and reducing the required trapping effort is to use mink rafts.

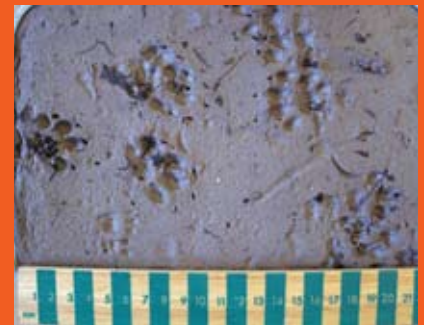


Mink raft

Mink rafts detect the presence of mink using a clay tracking cartridge. They double as favourable trapping locations, as they are located in vegetation along the water's edge where mink generally forage. Rafts consist of a polystyrene base sandwiched between two plywood boards and tethered to the bank.

A wooden tunnel is screwed onto the top of the raft over which vegetation can be draped to form camouflage. The clay tracking cartridge sits under the tunnel. The top of the cartridge consists of a layer of clay-sand mix over floral foam held in a plastic basket. The floral foam keeps the clay-sand mix damp allowing good imprints of footpads to be formed by any animal that passes through the tunnel, including mink. The raft exploits the natural curiosity of mink and requires no bait to encourage them to investigate the tunnel.

Once set up with the tracking cartridge in place the raft needs to be monitored only once a week to check for the presence of mink footprints. Water vole activity may also be recorded on the raft.



Mink tracks in clay cartridge

On discovering mink footprints in the clay, the basket is removed from the raft and a live-capture cage trap is placed in the tunnel to capture the mink. Any non-target species can be released unharmed. The trap is checked at least once a day until a mink is caught or to a maximum of 10 days after which the cage-trap is removed and the clay tracking cartridge replaced. Weekly monitoring then resumes.

Mink rafts are placed at 1km intervals along a watercourse, depending on the availability of suitable sites. Rafts and traps may be supplied free of charge by the Project to land managers within mink control scheme areas. Land managers are asked to record capture data so the Project can assess the success of mink control. The Project relies on local volunteers to carry out monitoring and trapping on mink rafts.

Signs of the recovery of water vole populations are starting to appear in some areas of Hertfordshire where local communities have participated in mink control schemes. Land managers across the county have also reported the return of songbirds and waterfowl along their rivers.

WHERE CAN I PARTICIPATE?

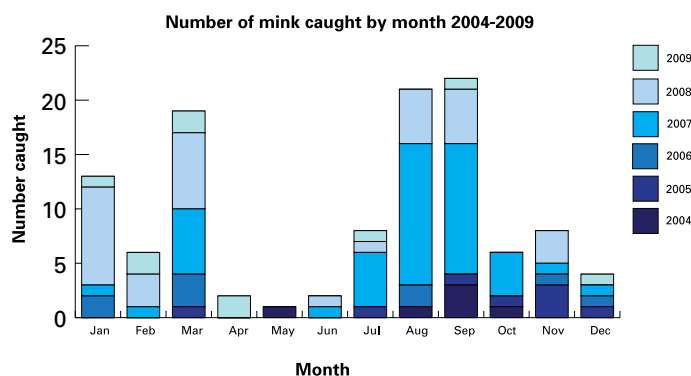
The Wildlife Trust coordinates mink control schemes on rivers across Hertfordshire. There may be a scheme in your local area that you can participate in. The map opposite shows existing and former mink control sites in Hertfordshire. Please contact the Wildlife Trust if you would like to participate in a mink control scheme or to report mink sightings.

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Mink control sites in Hertfordshire

WHEN CAN I CARRY IT OUT?



Mink control can be carried out throughout the year with the most successful times being August to October and January to March, as illustrated on the graph of captures on the River Stort, opposite.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION SEE:

- HMWT Mink Control Manual
- Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust: www.gwct.org.uk

WHY DO WE NEED MINK CONTROL?

Reducing mink numbers has allowed recovery of water vole numbers across Britain. Numbers of mink on watercourses can become very high where they are not controlled. For example, over 50 mink were caught in a 20km stretch of the River Stort in the first year of a control scheme. This level of mink activity not only affects water voles but also populations of fish and birds that live along waterways.

BEFORE YOU START

- The most effective trapping is as part of a scheme. Contact the Wildlife Trust to find out what is happening in your local area.
- Environment Agency consent may be needed to place rafts on rivers and streams.
- By law, traps must be checked daily once set.
- The Wildlife Trust may be able to supply equipment free of charge to help with mink control.

The Heritage Lottery funded Wetlands for Water Voles & People Project is a partnership of the Wildlife Trust, Environment Agency, Lee Valley Regional Park Authority, British Waterways and the Hertfordshire Biological Records Centre.

For more information contact:

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