



Herts and
Middlesex

Grazing & mowing for water voles



Water voles need waterbodies with stable banks for burrows as well as lush vegetation for feeding and hiding from predators. Banks that are heavily grazed or frequently mown are not suitable for water voles and if they remain in such areas they will succumb to predation quickly. Heavily grazed banks with lots of poaching also put lots of silt into river systems, which is bad for water quality and fish and invertebrates that depend on gravelly bottoms. Over-mown banks lose diversity of vegetation structure and the number of plants and invertebrates using them will decline.

MANAGING BANKSIDE VEGETATION

Grazing

Banks of rivers and streams benefit from light grazing that allows a varied sward height, control of scrub and bramble and light poaching in small areas that provides niches for plants and invertebrates.

Banks that are heavily grazed by cattle and horses do not provide enough vegetation for water voles to feed on and hide in from predators. Burrows will also be trampled. Where possible, the stocking level of fields next to rivers should be kept to low numbers of cattle or lighter breeds should be used.

If it is not possible to vary the existing stocking level and banks are becoming unstable and heavily poached, fencing should be put in place. Ideally fences should be placed about 5m from the bank top with a field gate set into it so that later in the season or for short periods during the year a few animals can be let in to graze.

If this is not possible, then fencing closer to the bank top is still a good option. However, it is important to consider management to prevent scrub and tree development in the fenced area. Drinking areas can be provided (see below).



Mowing

Regular cutting of vegetation along waterways can pose a serious problem for water voles by removing food supply and concealment from predators.

To prevent scrub development on riverbanks, vegetation management should be done on a rotational basis and in patches. By alternating patches annually, woody scrub will be controlled without detriment to water voles. Leaving a strip of vegetation at least 2m wide from the water's edge and cutting patches of 30-50m is ideal.

When cutting bankside vegetation, set cutting blades high (15cm) to promote grass re-growth in late summer and provide cover for water voles.

Vegetation should be removed after mowing to prevent the build-up of nutrients on the bank. Many small flowering plants and fine grasses will be outcompeted by common nettle and coarse grasses, such as false-oat grass and cocksfoot, where nutrient levels become higher.



WHEN SHOULD I MOW OR GRAZE BANKS?

To minimise impacts of management on water voles, grazing or mowing of banks should be carried out with consideration to the breeding season. Water vole populations are at their lowest and most vulnerable in the spring – up to 70% of water voles die over the winter months. Breeding begins in April with water voles setting up territories from March. Breeding continues into late summer and autumn, until October.

Grazing is ideally delayed until August, although light grazing through the summer may be acceptable.

Mowing in October should be sufficient to keep grasses and flowering plants down over the winter. Mowing in spring should be avoided, but a first cut in July may be acceptable.



WHY SHOULD I MANAGE THE BANKS?

The management of banks of watercourses and ponds is key to the success of water voles that live in and around them. The removal and control of dense over-shading scrub cover and protection of the banks from erosion and poaching will encourage better bankside grass cover for water voles.

Water voles also use rivers as corridors between colonies, allowing vital genetic mixing within the whole population and the establishment of new colonies. Good vegetation between existing colonies is therefore as important to the long-term survival of our water voles by providing shelter for them during their travels.



BEFORE YOU START

- Nearly all works in, over, under or adjacent to main rivers require consent from the Environment Agency. Contact them at the earliest opportunity if you are interested in fencing your river banks. www.environment-agency.gov.uk
- Contact Natural England for advice before changing grazing or mowing regimes within Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs). www.naturalengland.org.uk

FURTHER INFORMATION

**Water Vole Conservation Handbook,
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