

# Wetlands for Water Voles & People



Herts & Middlesex

## Rat control & water voles

**Pest control may lead to the unnecessary destruction of water vole colonies.**

**This factsheet explains how to control rats without harming water voles.**

Water voles were once a common sight along our waterways but are now Britain's fastest declining mammal. Populations have fallen by over 90% in the last century and, as a result, the water vole now needs protection nationwide.

Water voles are still present in Hertfordshire, but in small numbers. Populations are known to be present on the rivers Mimram, Purwell, Rhee, Chess and in the Lee Valley, as on the map below, whilst small colonies may exist in other areas. It is vital that we protect our remaining water voles to ensure their future survival and population growth throughout the county.

- Water voles are easily confused with common or brown rats.
- Rats are pests but water voles are a legally protected species.

### Threats to water voles

The main causes for the decline of water vole populations have been loss and damage to habitat and predation by American mink. The remaining colonies are vulnerable, so any activity that poses the slightest threat to water voles must be undertaken with extreme care.



Kenny Crooks - Tees Valley Wildlife Trust

### How pest control affects water voles

Rats prey on young water voles, so careful rat control will benefit water vole colonies.

However, controlling rats may lead to accidental destruction of water vole colonies. Damage occurs when water voles are mistaken for rats, or when control methods are used carelessly.

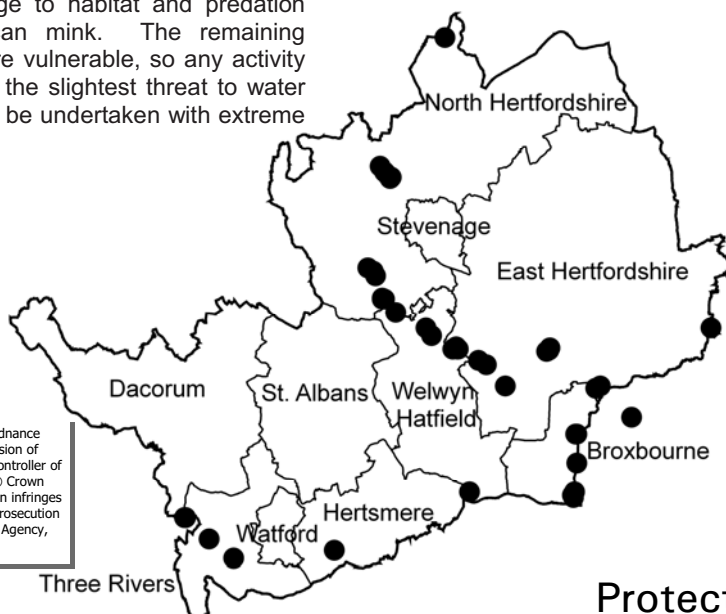
### What the law says

Water voles have full legal protection under the Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981, Schedule 5, Section 9. It is an offence to:

- intentionally kill, injure or take (capture) a water vole;

- possess or control a live or dead water vole, or any part of a water vole;
- intentionally or recklessly damage, destroy or obstruct access to any structure or place that water voles use for shelter or protection or disturb water voles while they are using such a place;
- sell, offer for sale or advertise for live or dead water voles.

Blocking water vole burrows is illegal. Placing traps or bait boxes into or in the way of water vole burrows could lead to prosecution. Offences carry a maximum penalty of a £5,000, imprisonment for up to six months, or both.



This map is reproduced from Ordnance Survey material with the permission of Ordnance Survey on behalf of the controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office © Crown copyright. Unauthorised reproduction infringes Crown Copyright and may lead to prosecution or civil proceedings. Environment Agency, 100026380, 2009

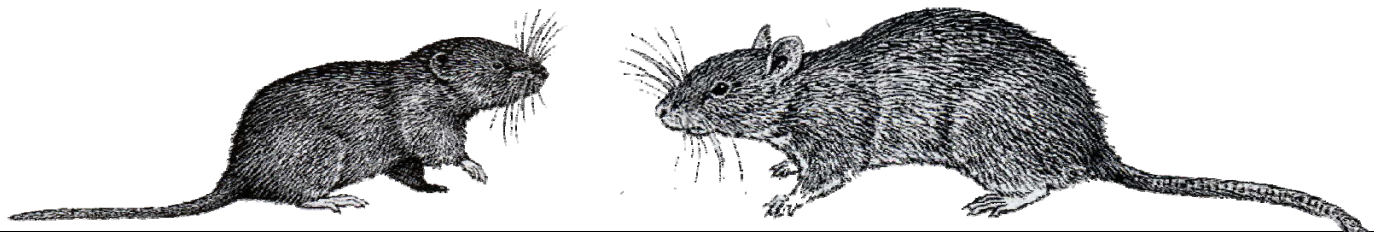
## How you can help

If you are controlling pests near water, check for signs of water voles before starting. The Wildlife Trust can provide information on water vole presence at many sites. Both water voles and rats burrow into the banks of most types of waterway.

Water voles are usually restricted to within several metres of the water's edge. Use the chart overleaf to check for signs of water voles. If you find water voles and rats, follow the advice in this leaflet.

**If in doubt, contact the Wildlife Trust.**

Protecting **Wildlife** for the Future



	<b>Water vole (<i>Arvicola terrestris</i>)</b>	<b>Brown rat (<i>Rattus norvegicus</i>)</b>
<b>Size and shape</b>	Water voles have rounded bodies and grow to 320g, smaller than an adult male rat.	Rats are bigger than water voles. Adult males weigh up to 500g.
<b>Colour</b>	Water voles are generally mid-brown with silky fur. Dark brown or black individuals may occur, especially in uplands.	Grey or brown with a paler underside.
<b>Snout, ears and tail</b>	Water voles have short blunt snouts. Their ears are almost hidden by fur. Their furry tail is two thirds of their body length.	Rats have pointed snouts and very obvious round ears. Their tails are as long as their bodies, and appear scaly and hairless.
<b>Burrows</b>	4-8cm diameter burrows usually found at the water's edge or up to 3m away in the bank. Circles of short nibbled vegetation are often found around holes of the higher burrows.	8 - 10cm diameter burrows may occur well away from the water's edge often with a heap of soil in a 'fan' shape outside the entrance.
<b>Paths</b>	Usually one main track along water's edge, with some paths pushing up into vegetation higher up the bank. Paths are normally concealed in grass and stay near the water.	A network of well trampled paths connecting all burrows. Paths may lead across open land away from the water.
<b>Droppings</b>	Between spring and autumn droppings are left in piles of 5 to 100, usually within 30cm of water. In winter droppings are dispersed. Droppings are 5 -10mm long and rounded at both ends. They have a putty-like texture, with very fine plant material visible. Green, brown, purplish or black in colour. No strong odour.	One or several left on paths or at the water's edge. Droppings are 12 - 15mm long, flat at one end and pointed at the other. Slimy or very soft texture, occasionally granular. Light brown to black in colour. Unpleasant odour of urine or ammonia.
<b>Feeding remains</b>	The diet of water voles is mainly vegetarian. Water voles leave small piles of chopped vegetation (approx. 10cm long and cut at a 45 degree angle with grooved teeth-marks at ends) at feeding sites on banks.	Rats are opportunist feeders and will eat a variety of foods. Remains of meals such as broken snail shells are sometimes found on the riverbank.
<b>Footprints</b>	Not a reliable guide.	Not a reliable guide.

### How to control rats when water voles may be present:

- Always check for signs of water voles before controlling rats along waterways - if in doubt, contact the Wildlife Trust.
- Avoid using poison. If there is no alternative, poison should be covered or enclosed in a bait box at least 5m from the water's edge.
- Avoid the use of poisoned grain or pellets. Use wax or soap blocks instead. If possible, site the bait off the ground, as rats are more likely to climb than water voles.
- In urban areas, covert bait stations designed as manhole covers or incorporated into litter bins (right) can be used.
- Do not place poison inside burrows. It is illegal to block or obstruct water vole burrows.
- Use live capture cage traps wherever possible - check twice per day to release non-target animals.
- As water voles prefer areas with vegetation cover, site traps in the open or cut back vegetation if necessary.
- Place traps more than 2m from the water's edge as water voles use the upper banks less often.
- Avoid using break-back traps or place more than 5m from the water's edge.
- Regularly inspect and monitor the control site, clearing away poisoned corpses. If any dead water voles are found, stop and review the control method used.



Images courtesy of www.sxenvironmental.co.uk

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:

#### Wetlands for Water Voles and People Project

Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust  
Grebe House, St Michael's Street,  
St Albans, Hertfordshire AL3 4SN

Tel: 01727 858901

Email: [water.vole@hmwtr.org](mailto:water.vole@hmwtr.org)

Website: [www.wildlifetrust.org.uk/herts](http://www.wildlifetrust.org.uk/herts)

