

# Water voles

Protected Species  
Guidance Note: 2014

Survey Season Calendar

Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec

  Optimal    
   Sub-optimal    
   Inappropriate

## Why Survey?

### SERVICES:

- Habitat assessment for the presence of water voles
- Surveys, monitoring, and translocation
- Advice on legislation and best practice
- Negotiation with statutory and non-statutory bodies
- Licence applications
- Mitigation guidelines and site advice during works
- Site supervision and monitoring
- Management plans for water vole habitat

In April 2008, water voles were given even greater legal protection, due to their continuing population decline. Contributing factors were habitat loss and degradation, population fragmentation and predation by mink.

Due to the protection afforded to water voles, it is necessary to identify if they are present prior to any riparian site clearance or development. This enables assessment of the likely impacts on this species. We are experienced in searching for evidence of water voles, informing on their presence or absence. If you are planning any disturbance to slow flowing or static freshwater bodies, which will affect water levels or change in flow, bank profiling, or water quality, then you should consider a water vole survey. The active survey (and breeding) season runs from mid-April to mid-September. Surveys may be requested by either the planning authority or the Environment Agency. If water voles are present, suitable protection or mitigation measures need to be put in place, prior to work commencing.

## Methodology

Water vole colonies and individual territories vary greatly in size, depending upon habitat quality, population density and time of year. There are a number of physical attributes that make stretches of waterways more suitable for water voles. They favour a predominantly steep, vegetated bank of earth or clay, in which to excavate holes to shelter and breed. The amount of bank-side vegetation present is important, with a continuous sward of well-structured, species diverse vegetation providing optimal habitat. Such a sward would ideally comprise a mixture of grasses, rushes and aquatic marginal species.

Surveys should follow the standard 500m methodology as described in the 'Water Vole Conservation Handbook' (English Nature, *et al* 2006 2nd Ed.), or an adapted version of it for shorter watercourses. Where possible, all surveys are undertaken from within the water. A two metre width of bank along the water's edge is included in the survey.

Signs of water vole activity are recorded on standard survey forms, which include comments regarding whether burrows are active or not. No evidence is recorded as positive for water vole, unless we are fully confident that it has not been created by other small mammal species. Locations of field signs are annotated on a sketch map, and GPS readings taken (where appropriate). Vegetation types and any other major physical features are also noted.



## Mitigation

Survey findings can inform mitigation measures, translocation methods and legal implications. In some cases, by slight modification of the proposed development location or method of installation, negative impacts on water voles can be avoided. At present, a licence is not required to survey for water voles, but if disturbance to them or their habitat is likely, close consultation with the relevant statutory nature conservation organisation is required. If deliberate 'intentional' damage to a water vole's place of shelter (burrow) is unavoidable, then a licence can be sought from Natural England to capture and translocate the individuals to an agreed nearby receptor site. This should only be considered when all other mitigation strategies have been considered and ruled out.

### Survey field signs:

- **faeces** – these are 8-12mm long and 4-5mm wide, varying in colour from green to black and are odourless
- **latrines** – found throughout the territory, often comprising a pile of flattened droppings (drum marking), with fresh droppings on top
- **feeding stations** – consist of a neat pile of chewed feeding remains
- **burrows** – these are typically wider than they are high, with a diameter of between 4 and 8cm, and are usually located along the water's edge
- **lawns** – around burrows there is often an area of grazed vegetation, surrounded by taller plants. These are most often produced when the female is nursing young
- **nests** – these comprise a large ball of shredded material, often woven into the base of reeds. They are normally found in areas where the water table is high, such as wetlands
- **footprints** – the forefoot shows four toes in a star arrangement, with the hindfoot showing 5 toes. Footprints for the hindfoot are between 26 and 34mm
- **runways** – found within 2m of the water's edge, these are low tunnels within the vegetation

