



get in **VOLE**ved

The Newsletter of the BBOWT Mammal Project *March 2021*

2020 Water Vole Survey Results

One hundred and sixty-six 500 m sections of watercourse were surveyed for water voles within Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire in 2020 (Table 1). This is fewer than in previous years due to the coronavirus lockdown delaying the start of the survey season and preventing some volunteers from being able to undertake surveys. A huge **thank you** to those of you who were able to go ahead with the surveys despite the setbacks caused by the pandemic and to the landowners who kindly provided access to their land; we couldn't have done it without you!

There was a marked increase in the number of water vole sightings reported to the Water Vole Recovery Project in 2020, particularly during the first lockdown between April and May. This is likely because the watercourses were quieter with fewer boat users and pedestrians. One acrobatic water vole was even photographed sheltering from high water levels in a tree at BBOWT's Nature Discovery Centre in Thatcham.

Encouragingly, the 2020 surveys revealed an increase in water vole activity on the River Great Ouse since the previous surveys in 2017. Not only were more field signs recorded, but the population was also found to have extended its range downstream into the centre of Buckingham for the first time since their reintroduction in 2005-2006. To this day, this is the only water vole population in north Buckinghamshire.

Regrettably water voles were only recorded on one section of the Oxford Canal (near Yarnton), revealing a further decline from the two positive sections recorded in 2019. Mink are still active on the canal and a monitoring and control programme is underway at several locations to try to safeguard the remaining population. On a more positive note, water voles were recorded for the first time by the project on the Kennington Ditches in Oxford, the Limb Brook in South Leigh and the main River Thames near Eynsham.

Table 1. Summary of 2020 survey results
(colour coding denotes watercourses within same catchment)

Watercourse	Surveys		
	Positive	Negative	Total
Berkshire			
Kennet & Avon Canal	14	33	47
River Kennet	1	7	8
Buckinghamshire			
River Great Ouse	14	9	23
Oxfordshire			
Oxford Canal	1	16	17
Upper River Thames	36	10	46
Limb Brook	1	0	1
River Thames (Oxford)	3	3	6
Radley Brook	1	2	3
Bradford's Brook	0	1	1
Kennington Ditches	1	0	1
Wilts & Berks Canal	6	7	13
Total	73	77	150



A water vole in a ditch in Crawley, West Oxfordshire.
Photo credit: Jed Yarnold (2020)

American Mink Monitoring and Control

Mink monitoring and control continues to be an important aspect of the Water Vole Recovery Project's work. Indeed, the non-native American mink is still very much at large within Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire. Over 200 mink monitoring rafts were in operation across the three counties during the most recent mink trapping period (1st July 2019 – 30th June 2020) and 34 mink were trapped. This is a decrease in mink captures since the 2019-2020 trapping period, during which 48 mink were trapped. Again, this decline is likely to have been partly caused by the coronavirus lockdown restrictions preventing some volunteers from being able to get out and monitor their rafts. In 2020 alone, the Water Vole Recovery Project received twenty reports of mink (sightings and field signs) from members of the public within the three counties. This is similar to the 23 reports of sighting and field signs reported in 2019.

Over the last few years BBOWT has been using [Remoti mink trap alarms](#) to enable traps to be monitored remotely. These devices are highly recommended as they have proved to be very reliable, consequently improving animal welfare for trapped animals and considerably reducing the amount of time spent checking traps. The Upper Thames Local Key Area (LKA) for targeted water vole conservation recently benefited from the purchase of 15 Remoti trap alarms and 15 mink rafts as part of the Wetland Restoration Project at Chimney Meadows Nature Reserve (funded by a Water Environment Grant). This extra equipment is a welcome addition to help safeguard water voles within the largest LKA in the three counties.

If you are interested in monitoring a mink raft within our three counties to help protect water voles (and other native wildlife), or you currently monitor a raft and require any new equipment, then please get in touch.

Water Vole Survey Events

There are two water vole group survey events scheduled for the start of the survey season in west Oxfordshire and west Berkshire.

These are a great opportunity to refresh your field skills and to meet other surveyors whilst helping us to collect valuable data. Please get in touch if you would like to sign up to take part.

Sunday 25th April 10:00 – 13:00:
Kennet & Avon Canal at Colthrop

Saturday 8th May 10:00 – 13:00:
River Windrush near Witney

If you are unable to make the dates but are keen to refresh your field skills then let us know and we may be able to arrange for you to join us or another surveyor on a survey instead.

Badger Vaccination Update

Regrettably, September 2020 saw the arrival of the badger cull in several newly licenced counties, including Oxfordshire, despite the government promising to phase out culling in England in favour of badger vaccination back in March. The 2020 cull alone resulted in the death of 38,642 badgers (the highest figure to date). BBOWT, which has been delivering a successful badger vaccination programme since 2014, is deeply saddened that the cull is now undermining our work. Thank you to those of you who wrote to your local MPs, signed petitions and responded to the consultation demanding an end to the cull. Sadly, it seems that the existing four-year cull licenses (including in Oxfordshire) will continue into 2021. In addition to this, 2021 culling licenses are likely to be approved in new cull zones in Oxfordshire and also in Berkshire for the first time.

In 2020 our Badger Vaccination Project continued. Despite fewer cubs surviving the autumn and winter floods along with a period of drought in early summer, we successfully trapped and vaccinated 52 badgers. Looking ahead to the 2021 vaccination season, we will continue to vaccinate at our sites in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire. If you are based in West Berkshire and interested in helping with our vaccination programme, we are looking for people who could help to install and pre-bait traps and would therefore love to hear from you.

Dormice at Padworth Common

To finish on an uplifting note, a dormouse was recorded at one of BBOWT's nature reserves Padworth Common for the first time in 2020. The hibernating dormouse was unexpectedly found on the 2nd December by a volunteer whilst undertaking routine scrub and bracken clearance. Fortunately, the dormouse was unharmed and the nest, along with its sleeping occupant was moved to a safe location. The site management plan now includes dormice.

Contact us: Julia Lofthouse, Mammal Project Manager, email: julialofthouse@bbowt.org.uk

Lucy Stoddart, Mammal Project Field Officer, email: lucystoddart@bbowt.org.uk

BBOWT, The Lodge, 1 Armstrong Road, Littlemore, Oxford, OX4 4XT

Telephone: 01865 775476