



# get in **VOLE**ved

The Newsletter of the BBOWT Mammal Project *March 2020*

## 2019 Water Vole Survey Results

In 2019, a total of **314** 500 m stretches of watercourse were surveyed for water voles throughout Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire, amounting to over 157 km. The table on the right provides a summary of the survey results for each watercourse. We would like to take the opportunity to say a big **thank you** to all of the dedicated volunteer surveyors who took part in this year's surveys, as well as the landowners who granted access to their land, you play a crucial role in helping us to monitor and protect Britain's fastest declining native mammal.

Regrettably no water voles were recorded on the River Glyme or the River Dorn once again this year. The River Glyme was the site of two water vole re-introductions in 2005 and despite persisting for nearly 10 years, the population has declined recently and now appears to be locally extinct. New reported sightings on the River Loddon and the Tongewell Brook at Milton Keynes were followed up, but sadly no evidence of water voles was recorded. Elsewhere, water voles had increased on the upper stretches of the River Ock around Charney Bassett, meaning that this population has now linked up with the small population on the nearby Frogmoor Brook. There were also small expansions in water vole range on the Mill Brook in south Oxfordshire and the River Chess in south Bucks.

Predation by the non-native American mink continues to pose a major threat to the water vole, and mink are subsequently monitored across our three counties by using rafts housing clay tracking pads to detect their footprints. 219 of these rafts were in use in 2019, which enabled the trapping of 48 mink. If you are interested in helping with mink control or you currently monitor a raft and require any new equipment or clay then please get in touch.

Table 1. Summary of 2019 survey results  
(colour coding denotes watercourses within same catchment)

| Watercourse            | Surveys    |            |            |
|------------------------|------------|------------|------------|
|                        | Positive   | Negative   | Total      |
| <b>Berkshire</b>       |            |            |            |
| Holy Brook             | 0          | 8          | 8          |
| Hurst Ditches          | 0          | 3          | 3          |
| Kennet & Avon Canal    | 12         | 37         | 49         |
| River Loddon           | 0          | 3          | 3          |
| <b>Buckinghamshire</b> |            |            |            |
| River Chess            | 28         | 12         | 40         |
| River Great Ouse       | 1          | 0          | 1          |
| Tongewell Brook        | 0          | 3          | 3          |
| <b>Oxfordshire</b>     |            |            |            |
| River Dorn             | 0          | 5          | 5          |
| River Glyme            | 0          | 32         | 32         |
| Mill Brook             | 10         | 5          | 15         |
| Oxford Canal           | 2          | 19         | 21         |
| River Ock              | 30         | 10         | 40         |
| Sandford Brook         | 12         | 6          | 18         |
| River Stert            | 3          | 8          | 11         |
| Great Brook            | 10         | 4          | 14         |
| Upper Thames           | 0          | 5          | 5          |
| Lower River Windrush   | 23         | 23         | 46         |
| <b>Total</b>           | <b>131</b> | <b>183</b> | <b>314</b> |



A water vole at Standlake Common on the River Windrush.  
Photo credit: Denis Kennedy

## Habitat Improvement Work on the Wadley Stream

Scrub management is an essential tool for improving riparian habitats for water voles. The removal of scrub allows the penetration of light so that marginal and submerged plants can grow, providing water voles with the food and cover from predation that they need to survive. In February 2019 and 2020, BBOWT staff and volunteers cut back sections of hedgerow along the Wadley Stream located south of Chimney Meadows where a small population of water voles live. Thank you to the landowner for allowing access (and for providing sausage rolls!), and to the volunteers for all of your hard work.



## In Otter News...

Sadly the Eurasian otter suffered major population crashes throughout much of Britain in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The cause of this decline was most likely the combined effects of habitat destruction, including drainage of our wetlands, and pollution. Fortunately, in recent years otters have made an incredible comeback and they are now thriving on many of the watercourses within our three counties. In 2019, otter signs were recorded along 52 water vole survey sections, with watercourses such as the River Ock and River Windrush being particularly fruitful. Indeed, 73% of survey stretches of the River Ock yielded otter signs. Unfortunately an increase in otter numbers also means more traffic fatalities. February 2020 saw a particularly high death toll on major roads such as the A34 in Oxfordshire. If you see a dead otter please call your local **Environment Agency** on **01491 828696**. They will collect the carcass and send it to the [Cardiff University Otter Project](#) to undergo post-mortem analysis.

## Badger Vaccination Update

Since 2014, BBOWT has been administering vaccinations against bovine tuberculosis (bTB) to badgers and we are celebrating the [recent news](#) that the Government has decided to phase out badger culling, in favour of badger (and eventually cattle) vaccination. Research shows that badger vaccination is currently the most effective approach in reducing the prevalence of bTB in badger populations. Vaccination is also a far more cost-effective and humane approach than the alternative of culling. 2019 saw the fifth successful year of vaccinations on BBOWT's nature reserves in Oxfordshire, and fourth successful year in west Berkshire (a 20 km<sup>2</sup> area around Greenham Common funded by DEFRA ).

A total of 41 badgers were trapped and vaccinated in 2019, with Chimney Meadows being our most successful site. The total number of badgers vaccinated was slightly down from the 2018 total (55 badgers); this was likely due to 2019 being a much wetter summer and as a result of a major storm event during one of the trapping nights. During periods of wet weather, the moist ground surface encourages worms (the badger's preferred food) and other invertebrates to be more active and consequently become easy pickings. When worms are so readily available, the trap bait (peanuts) may not appear as delectable. We are looking forward to expanding our work in 2020, with permission to access three potential new sites. Find out more about the Wildlife Trust's vaccination schemes at: [www.wildlifetrusts.org/wildlife-and-wild-places/saving-species/badgers/solution](http://www.wildlifetrusts.org/wildlife-and-wild-places/saving-species/badgers/solution)

## Water Vole Survey Events

We have two water vole group survey events planned for the start of the survey season in west Oxfordshire and west Berkshire. These are a great opportunity to refresh your field skills and meet other surveyors, please let us know if you would like to sign up to take part. If you are unable to make the dates but are keen to accompany us on a survey to refresh your field skills then please do get in touch.

[Sunday 29<sup>th</sup> March 10.00 - 13.00:  
Kennet & Avon Canal, Thatcham.](#)  
Meet at the Nature Discovery Centre in Thatcham

[Saturday 4<sup>th</sup> April 10.00 - 13.00:  
River Windrush, Witney.](#)  
Meet at Linear Fisheries near Hardwick

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