



get in **VOLE**ved

The Newsletter of the BBOWT Mammal Project February 2024

2023 Water Vole Survey Results

With your help we covered approximately **165 km** of watercourses this year; a *huge thanks* to all of you who undertook surveys!

The 2023 survey results were a mixed bag – generally speaking, water vole populations have remained stable within the River Chess Local Key Area (LKA) and within the Abingdon LKA (our second largest LKA, coloured yellow in the table). Within the Abingdon LKA, surveys of the Childrey Brook were more extensive than in 2017, revealing that water voles had not only maintained their range west of Grove and southwest of Marcham, but they were also recorded along most of the channel in-between. The Letcombe Brook population had largely retained its range since 2021 surveys aside from a decline through Wantage, which may have partly been due to limited access to the banks. The water vole occupancy on the River Ock had remained fairly stable since 2019, although four adjoining sections became negative between Abingdon centre and the A34. The Sandford Brook results were slightly patchier, with occupancy having dropped by 17% since 2019. The River Stert water voles on the other hand had not only maintained their existing range but also recolonised the area either side of the A34 at Abingdon.

Within our largest LKA, the Upper Thames LKA (coloured blue in the table), we alarmingly recorded a very dramatic decline in water vole activity. During the previous 2021 surveys 36/46 (78% of sections) had evidence of water voles; this year that fell to just 3/42 (7%). An increase in mink sightings in the area and the prolonged flooding seen in spring, and summer are likely to be the main causes of the decline. Not only could the water voles have been displaced or drowned, but it may have also affected surveyors' ability to find signs.

It wasn't all bad news within the Upper Thames LKA however; the three sections on the River Windrush (in Witney and Stanton Harcourt)

Table 1. Summary of the 2023 survey results (colour coding denotes watercourses within the same Local Key Area for targeted water vole conservation)

Watercourse	Surveys		
	Positive	Negative	Total
Berkshire			
Holy Brook	0	3	3
Kennet & Avon Canal	3	58	61
River Thames tributaries at Cookham	5	3	8
Buckinghamshire			
River Chess	27	6	33
Oxfordshire			
Childrey Brook	23	7	30
Letcombe Brook	15	6	21
River Ock and Nor Brook	25	11	36
Radley Brook	1	2	3
Sandford Brook	9	9	18
River Stert and side ditch	4	7	11
Woodhill Brook	1	5	6
Littlemore Brook	0	6	6
River Dorn and River Glyme	0	21	21
Limb Brook and tributaries/ditches	7	2	9
River Windrush	3	0	3
Upper River Thames	3	39	42
Oxford Canal	1	16	17
Total	127	201	328

used for survey refreshers revealed bountiful field signs and water voles were recorded on new sections of the Limb Brook and connected channels around Eynsham.

The Kennet & Avon Canal sadly saw further declines in water vole activity this year (again likely due to mink), with just three positive sections (two east of Newbury and one at Kintbury).

The River Glyme and River Dorn between Bladon and east of Glympton were both re-surveyed this year, along with the Holy Brook at Calcot near Reading, but sadly, as in previous years, these watercourses remain negative.

Following water vole releases at Cookham near Maidenhead in 2021 and 2022, low levels of activity were once again recorded within the release sites along with further activity on nearby watercourses.

American Mink Control and Welcome to Clare!

During the most recent mink trapping season (01/07/2022 – 30/06/2023) **42** mink captures were reported within Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire. This total was down from the previous 2021-2022 trapping season (52). The current trapping period (01/07/2023 – 30/06/2024) is set to be a bumper year, with at least 41 mink having already been trapped since July). This is in part due to increased trapping effort in West Berkshire around Hungerford and Thatcham in response to a spike in mink sightings in the area (coupled with a decrease in water vole activity). Other locations where members of the public reported seeing mink included Grafton Lock and Rushey Lock on the upper River Thames (likely a major factor in the decline in water vole activity there this year), Cookham near Maidenhead, the River Thames through Reading, and the Speen area just west of Newbury. Mink control is in place at these locations and we will continue to encourage trapping.

It gives us great pleasure to introduce Clare Pitt who started in October as the new 'Joining the Dots' Project Officer. Clare's role is funded by a Natural England Species Recovery Programme grant with the aim to extend our existing mink control outside of the current water vole LKAs, linking up with other projects such as the [Waterlife Recovery Trust](#). It is hoped that this funding will enable us to shift our focus from mink *control* to *eradication*. Clare comes to us with a strong background in non-native species management, having previously spent over a year controlling tenrecs and shrews in Mauritius (Durrell & Mauritian Wildlife Foundation), as well as rat control on San Cristóbal Island (Galápagos archipelago).

Clare's target areas for installing mink rafts are the **River Kennet** (Newbury - Reading); the **River Thames** (Reading - Cookham; Lechlade - Radcot; Newbridge - Farmoor; Farmoor - Oxford; Oxford - Abingdon; Abingdon - Wallingford; Wallingford - Reading; and Cookham – Denham); the **River Great Ouse** (Newport Pagnell - Buckingham); the **River Thame** (Aylesbury - Dorchester); the **River Cherwell** (Banbury - Oxford); and the **River Evenlode** (Kingham - Cassington).

Please get in touch with Clare if you can help with any potential mink raft installation sites or landowner contacts, or if you are willing to help monitor a raft and/or undertake dispatch of trapped mink. Clare's funding covers equipment including mink rafts, traps and [Remoti alarm units](#); please contact her if you are interested in finding out more (contact details below).

Water Vole Survey Events

There are three survey refresher events scheduled this April. These group surveys are good opportunities to refresh your field skills as well as to meet other surveyors. Please let us know if you would like to attend one of the sessions and we will send joining instructions. If you are unable to make the dates below but keen to brush up on your field skills, then please get in touch as it may be possible to join us or another experienced surveyor on a survey.

Saturday 6th April 10:00 – 12:30
River Windrush, Witney

Saturday 13th April 10:00 – 12:30
River Kennet near Hungerford

Sunday 14th April 10:00 – 12:30
Thames tributary, Cookham



Clare Pitt, Joining the Dots P.O.

Badger Vaccination Update

2023 marked the final year of vaccinating badgers within our Badger Edge Vaccination Scheme 2 (BEVS 2) area in West Berkshire. In 2022 DEFRA announced that they planned to move to farmer-led badger vaccination schemes but provided some funding to carry BEVS 2 vaccinations through one more year. With a scaled back vaccination effort, last year we trapped and vaccinated a total of 29 badgers in West Berkshire and Oxfordshire. Fewer cubs were trapped than usual, which anecdotally seems to have been a trend seen across the country. This may have been due to low survival rates owing to flooding of setts, as well as the large amount of rain resulting in earthworms being more readily available. A special thanks to our volunteers Ewan and Martin who helped with the vaccinations in Berkshire once again! In 2024 we will continue vaccinating at our sites in Oxfordshire alongside liaising with DEFRA and local farmers in new areas to plan future vaccinations schemes.

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