



# get in **VOLE**ved

The Newsletter of the BBOWT Mammal Project February 2025

## 2024 Water Vole Survey Results

A respectable 330 water vole surveys were completed within the three counties in 2024, equating to approximately 165 km! *Thank you so much* to all of you who volunteered your time and worked around the heavy rain and flooding in both spring and late summer. Eighty-nine surveys were undertaken by our volunteers, 67 by BBOWT's Ecology Trainees, 150 by Lucy and Julia, and the rest by partner organisations Action for the River Kennet (ARK); Wild Cookham and Letcombe Brook (7, 13 and 4 respectively).

You can view all of the presence/absence water vole data between 2002 and 2024 via [this link](#).

The map should currently open showing all years' survey results as default, but you can filter on the right-hand side to 2024 (or other years), as well as search for specific survey section codes (e.g. OXC 004 on the Oxford Canal). Note that red symbolises a positive survey and green indicates a negative survey.

Our largest Local Key Area (LKA) for targeted water vole conservation continues to be the Upper Thames LKA (coloured blue in the table). A highlight of this year's survey programme was recording water voles on the River Evenlode and its tributary the Littlestock Brook in Shipton-under-Wychwood following reported sightings in the area. This is the first time they have been recorded back on the River Evenlode and its tributaries since 2013. The water vole population along the Great Brook appeared to have suffered a slight decline, potentially because of severe flooding in the spring and late summer. Water voles had generally maintained their stronghold on the middle reaches of the River Windrush however, with abundant field signs found particularly around Burford and Witney.

Our second largest LKA continues to be the Abingdon LKA (shown in yellow). Water voles were found to be thriving at Iffley Meadows, Kennington and near Sandford-on-Thames.

Table 1. Summary of the 2024 survey results (colour coding denotes watercourses within the same Local Key Area for targeted water vole conservation)

Watercourse	Surveys		
	Positive	Negative	Total
<b>Berkshire</b>			
Kennet & Avon Canal	7	54	61
River Kennet	49	10	59
River Pang	0	4	4
River Thames and tributaries at Cookham	6	8	14
<b>Buckinghamshire</b>			
River Great Ouse	9	14	23
River Thames north of Henley	0	1	1
<b>Oxfordshire</b>			
Bradford's Brook at Wallingford	0	3	3
Clanfield Brook	2	1	3
Great Brook	7	7	14
River Evenlode and tributaries	3	20	23
The River Thames at Swinford	0	2	2
Middle River Windrush	32	16	48
Shill Brook	11	9	20
Frogmore Brook	6	5	11
Letcombe Brook	0	4	4
River Thames and tributaries at Oxford	7	7	14
Oxford Canal	2	15	17
River Thames and Lady Brook at Benson	6	3	9
<b>Total</b>	<b>147</b>	<b>183</b>	<b>330</b>

In Buckinghamshire, the water vole populations reintroduced along the River Great Ouse back in 2005 and 2006 continue to persist, albeit at lower densities than previously recorded in 2020 in some areas, likely due to an influx of mink in the area.

In Berkshire, we saw an increase in water vole activity on the Kennet & Avon Canal around Thatcham in response to increased mink control efforts in the area. This enlarged the LKAs and reconnected the water vole populations up and downstream of Newbury. Once again, no water voles were found on the River Pang, however Dr Merryl Gelling believes she may have recorded one at Moor Copse on a bat detector!

## American Mink Control

The most recent mink trapping season (01/07/2023 – 30/06/2024) yielded an impressive **87** mink captures within Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire. This is a dramatic increase from the 42 mink trapped during the previous 2021-2022 trapping season. Over the past year and a half, we have been able to benefit from Natural England funding to increase mink control coverage, with the addition of Remoti trap alarm units. Clare Pitt, the 'Joining the Dots' (JTDs) Project Officer has been busy 'joining up' mink control schemes and, along with our project partner the River Thames Conservation Trust, has installed over 120 new mink rafts. We now have a total of over 360 mink rafts in place across the three counties and a higher percentage of rafts in active trapping mode.

We continue to work alongside the [Waterlife Recovery Trust](#) to fill in gaps in mink control and are getting closer to our shared ambition of a mink-free Britain. Sadly, Clare leaves us at the end of March to begin a PhD in invasive plant control at the University of Aberdeen. We are very grateful for all her hard work over the past year and a half and wish her all the best with her studies. We still have some mink rafts, traps and Remoti alarms to install so please get in touch if you know of any suitable installation sites, riparian landowner contacts or are willing to help monitor a raft/undertake dispatch. Areas which would still benefit from additional mink control include: the **River Kennet** (Newbury - Reading); **the River Thames** (Reading - Cookham; Lechlade - Radcot; Newbridge - Farmoor; Oxford - Abingdon; Abingdon - Wallingford; and Cookham - Denham); **the River Cherwell** (Banbury - Oxford); and **the River Evenlode** (Shipton-under-Wychwood - Cassington). We are looking into additional funding to extend the essential work of the JTDs Project beyond June this year.

## Otter Survey Results Update

As a water vole surveyor, you'll know that we also look for otter field signs when completing surveys. Data in recent years have shown that otters are doing remarkably well along our watercourses, when considering the catastrophic decline they endured in the 1950s/60s. Of the 330 surveys completed this year, 94 (over a quarter) had otter field signs (conclusive spraints, footprints or feeding signs). Otters appeared to be doing particularly well on the River Windrush, and perhaps surprisingly, on the Oxford Canal, with 21/48 and 9/17 positive survey sections respectively. Almost a third (18/59) of River Kennet sections were also positive. Please continue to record [otter signs](#) so we can monitor these amazing creatures.

## Badger Vaccination Update

This year, we focused on vaccinating at our Oxfordshire nature reserves Chimney Meadows and Cothill, successfully vaccinating 24 badgers, including 20 adults and 4 cubs.

Having finished our Badger Edge Vaccination Scheme 2 (BEVS 2) in West Berkshire in 2023, this year we have been undertaking badger surveys at some new estates to the east. We have been busy surveying for badger setts and latrines over the last month with the hope of connecting a new vaccination scheme with our previous vaccination sites. We wait in anticipation for confirmation about DEFRA funding for this year's vaccinations as the government develop their plans to role out additional support for badger vaccination schemes.

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## Water Vole Survey Events

We have two water vole survey events scheduled for this spring. These group surveys are great opportunities to learn survey techniques if you are new to surveying or refresh your field skills if you're an old hand. They are also an opportunity to meet other like-minded surveyors. Please let us know if you would like to attend either of them 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 to arrange accompanying us on a survey another time.

**Sat. 15<sup>th</sup> March** 10:00– 13:00  
River Chess, Chesham

**Sun. 6<sup>th</sup> April** 10:00 – 12:30  
River Windrush, Stanton  
Harcourt

## Mink dispatch training

For anyone interested in helping to eradicate mink, we are organising a humane mink dispatch training session on **Friday 21<sup>st</sup> March** (09:30 – 16:30). The training will be led by the British Association for Shooting and Conservation (BASC) at our Sutton Courtenay Environmental Education Centre. Please get in touch if you are interested in attending

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