



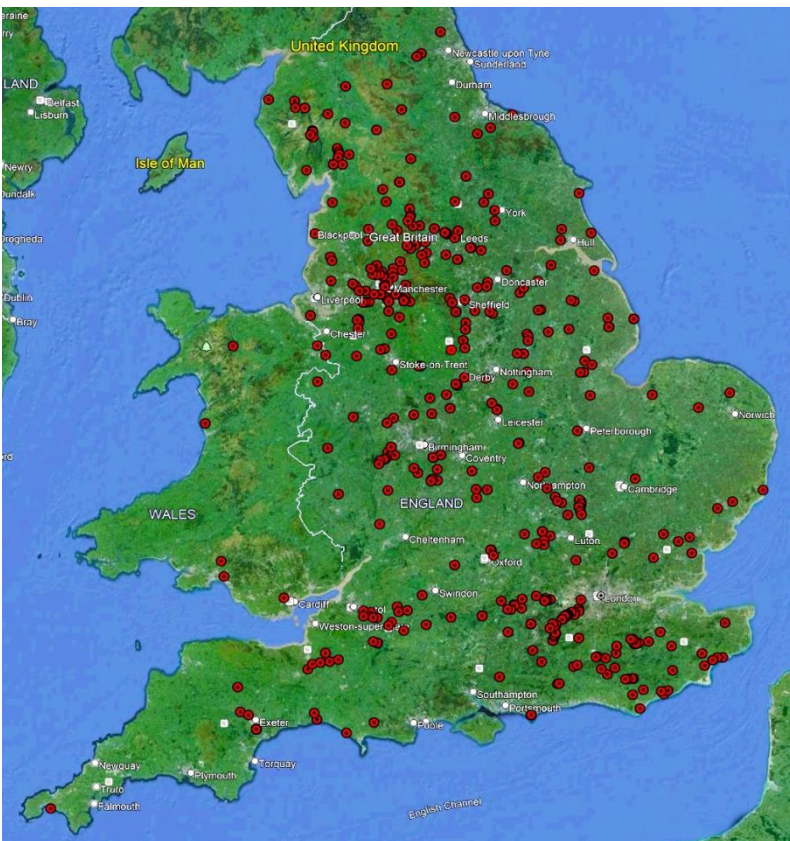
Waterlife Recovery Trust

NEWSLETTER 7: July 2024

From local to (inter)national

A few short years ago, our Vice-Chair Simon Baker was writing an annual newsletter to his Norfolk Mink Project team, and I was sending out news to fellow mink trappers in the Cambridgeshire Fens. Today, this

newsletter will be distributed to over 1,400 people across England, Wales and Scotland - such has been the speed with which interest in our work and results has spread. In parallel, reports and photos of mink sightings from members of the public via the WRT website have increased in number and geographical range. While these reports of course reflect human density as much as mink density, they are valuable in highlighting mink hotspots and coldspots. For example, London has the highest concentration of people, yet few mink are seen in the Capital. In contrast, Greater Manchester has fewer than a third of the people, yet we are inundated with reports of mink and an absence of ducks, moorhens and kingfishers from that area (see map). Manchester's native wildlife needs to be freed of what is clearly a very healthy and hungry mink population.



Locations of mink reports submitted by the public through the WRT website. NW England and Surrey/Sussex/Kent seem to have more than their fair share of mink. WRT is already working with partners to fix the problem in the southeast, and we are delighted to be starting work with Greater Mancunians later in July.

WRT is not yet working in NW England, but local people report that they are unable to get any help from elsewhere, so we offered to advise and assist if anyone could raise

some cash to pay for some smart traps. A brilliant crowd-funding initiative by some dedicated folks looking after two canals at Marple, southeast of Manchester city centre, has done the trick, and hopefully this pioneering initiative will be a catalyst for something approaching comprehensive mink trapping in the area.

I can't leave discussion of mink in a GB context without welcoming a new partner organisation from Northwest Wales. Mentor Môn is protecting water voles by trapping mink, the first of which arrived at my place for analysis last week. We're all keen to discover what can be learned about the local population from these, and especially from the genetics of mink so distant from others we've examined to date.

Mink Eradication in Bedfordshire, Buckinghamshire & Northamptonshire

By **Lara Mills**, WRT's Project Officer for Beds, Northants and Bucks. Lara has been employed by WRT's *Thames to Lincoln project* since September 2023, funded by Natural England's Species Recovery Programme. Lara hails from New Zealand, where the trapping of introduced predators is taught in schools, so she was a perfect fit for us, and has been doing an amazing job in these mink-rich counties.

Before the Thames to Lincoln project began, the status of the mink population in Bedfordshire and Northamptonshire was relatively unknown. In early 2023, 30 traps were installed in Bedfordshire in partnership with the Bedford Group of Drainage Boards. The catch rates from these traps, alongside the amount of mink caught on the Bedfordshire/Cambridgeshire border and the anecdotal evidence from historical trapping and sightings, led us to suspect that Bedfordshire and Northants could be full of mink. Continuing the partnership with the Bedford Group of Drainage Boards and working with the Beds, Cambs and Northants Wildlife Trust, various country parks and our amazing volunteers, we were able to increase this to 100 mink traps across Beds and Northants over the past year. Thanks to these efforts we can now confirm that these counties were indeed full of mink! Over 200 were caught across Beds, Bucks and Northants over the past 18 months. Thanks to everyone's hard work, we're making great strides in removing this invasive species and protecting our local wildlife.

The winter months were particularly exciting but equally challenging for the Bedfordshire area. The mink catch rate was probably highest just before Christmas, with as many as four mink caught in a single day. Luckily, mink also appear to celebrate Christmas and let us all enjoy the day off! But the break didn't last long, and we then had to combat with the incredibly high river levels and multiple traps that needed rescuing. A huge thank you to our volunteer dispatchers, who were always keen to put on the waders and get stuck in. Thankfully, the flooding did eventually stop, and the busy mink breeding season came to an end.

During this current lull in mink catching (due to the mink hunkering down with their young), we have been focusing on extending our trapping areas along the River Nene and the River Great Ouse. Currently, around 10 traps have been deployed along the Great River Ouse, linking up the Berks, Bucks and Oxon Wildlife Trust's pre-existing traps in Buckingham to those of the Milton Keynes Parks Trust and further along to the Bedfordshire traps. The plan is to install at least 40 more traps in Bucks and Northants, safeguarding the progress made so far in Beds and east Northants. The collaborative efforts and relentless dedication of all involved continue to drive the future success of this project in eradicating mink from this part of the country.

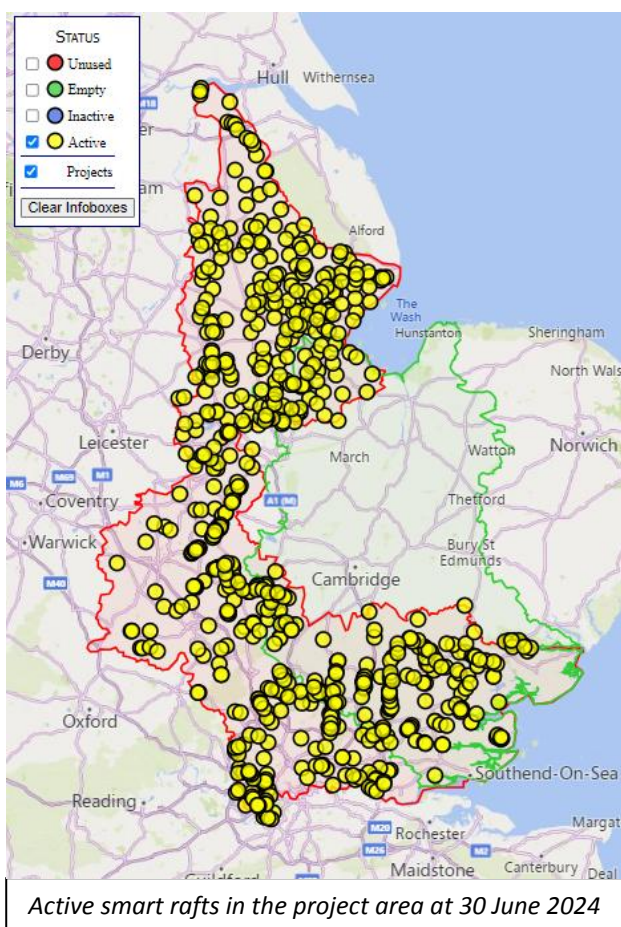


It's behind you! Part of Lara's work has been to provide support and guidance to people looking after a nature reserve just outside Northampton. These images were sent in by John Borland, who is doing research on water rails at the site (see adult and two chicks in the top photo). It's hard to be sure if the mink in the middle and lower images are one and the same individual. But the reassuring news is that a mink has been trapped here in recent days, so hopefully the water rail family will now thrive and grow.

Thames to Lincoln Project (TtL)- Partnership in Action

When I started with the Norfolk Mink Project in Norfolk, over 12 years ago now, I was struck by how much we could achieve with the help of partners each contributing a modest amount of funding, support from keen volunteers, and great but very poorly paid part-time Project Officers (POs) (writes **Simon Baker**, Chair of the project Steering Committee). We were at the time catching some 60-70 mink a year and just holding the population at a level that significantly reduced their impact on native wildlife. This for a total budget for Norfolk of up to £25,000 a year. We are now in a much better position, having effectively eradicated mink from Norfolk and Suffolk and been able to demonstrate that eradication is possible given a suitably funded and managed project.

Looking to the future we know that there will never be enough money to eradicate mink using paid trappers; partners and volunteers are and will remain key to success. Although funding for the TtL project from Natural England (NE) has allowed us to expand the area of mink trapping, we are still reliant on input



from our partners within the project area. Trapping in Essex, for example, is funded through a grant to the Essex Wildlife Trust from the Highways Agency. This took a while to come through but our new PO for the county, Ollie Mann, is now getting rafts out with volunteers at a great pace. Without such match funding we would struggle to make successful funding bids. We also rely on many partners for comprehensive coverage, such as Internal Drainage Boards, the Countryside Regeneration Trust, Herts Wildlife Trust and Thames 21, among others, all arranging trapping in their parts of the project area. The result of our combined effort is a total of 578 mink removed from the project counties since 1 August 2023 with 866 rafts now active (see map).

The project itself also acts as a lever to help raise funds in adjoining areas. Funding from the Environment Agency and DEFRA's 'Farming in Protected Landscapes' scheme, won by the Greater Lincolnshire Nature Partnership, has allowed us to trap most of Lincolnshire beyond the area funded by TtL. In a similar range extension, the Zoological Society of London and People's Trust for Endangered Species have found funding to allow us to trap in London south of the Thames.

We also have a close working relationship with partners all along our new western boundary, meeting regularly at Project Steering Committee meetings. Some of them have also been recipients of NE grants and their smart trapping data is now going directly into the WRT database which they can access. Berks, Bucks and Oxon Wildlife Trust, for example, are a neighbouring organisation that has been running a large mink control project using standard (non-smart) rafts for many years. They are now using smart traps in their NE funded 'Joining the dots' project to link their existing trapping network developed to protect their water vole colonies. We are now all benefiting from trapping in the respective areas reducing the immigration pressure from one to another.

County trapping roundup

The table (right) gives the total mink caught per county recorded on the WRT database since 2021, writes **Simon Baker**. The total shows an increase of 165 mink since the previous quarter's Newsletter. A modest catch you might think given the trapping effort that is taking place. However, it is exactly as we predicted given that mink are relatively hard to trap between April and June. However, all those trapped will be mature animals ready to breed, so their removal is particularly effective in reducing mink populations.

Reports from the public show that mink families are now out and about. The earliest litters will start to fend for themselves from early to mid-July. Juveniles will then form an increasing part of the mink catch for the rest of the year with both sexes becoming mature in time for mating next March.

It is not just trapping that takes its toll on young mink. The first few months of life are dangerous for them, just as they are for most mammals. They don't have the experience of adults and we see an increase in road casualties and them turning up in the most unexpected places. For example, the other day we received word of a youngster in someone's kitchen in Bedfordshire

(see photo below). The Project Officer went out immediately and the animal quickly found its way into a freezer, to await examination and sampling. Within weeks, cute kits become accomplished predators, so rapid early action like this saves the lives of countless prey animals in months and years to come.



Angela Richardson

The next quarter will see a strong upwards trend in the catch overall; although we hope not to see that in Norfolk and Suffolk, where, despite 500 active smart rafts, we have caught no mink in over a year! This has led us to very cautiously starting to remove traps from these counties, beginning a process that will become an integral part of WRT's operation - moving equipment from newly mink-free areas to an increasingly broad trapping 'front line'. Over the quiet breeding season, we picked up 68 traps from Norfolk; traps that met criteria such as they had never caught a mink and were in areas with a relatively high trap density. Once removed, the rafts are taken apart and steam cleaned (thanks to Suffolk WT help) along with the traps. The gear is then reassembled, put on pallets and shipped to areas where mink are still abundant. Biosecuring the equipment is of course vital; we must be fastidious about not spreading introduced invasive plants or invertebrates to new areas by way of seeds or eggs lurking in or on our rafts.

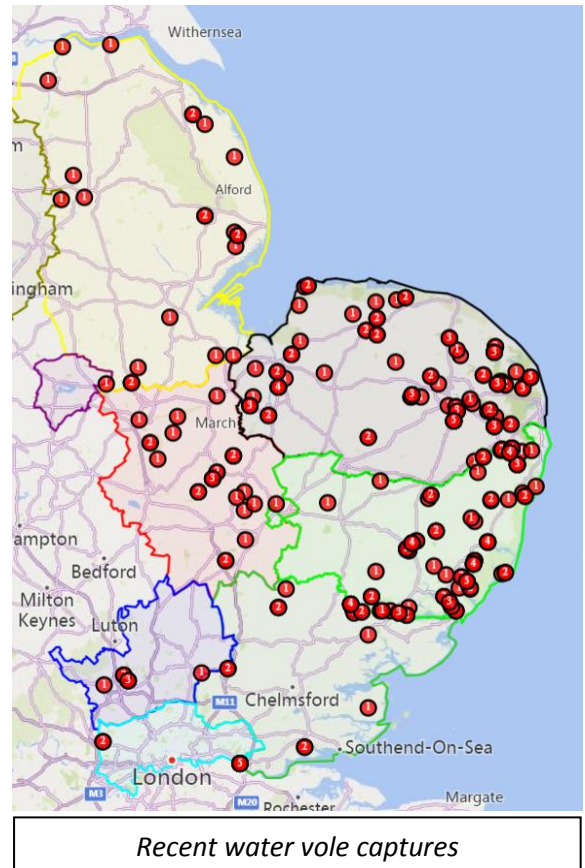
Annual Mink captures 1st Jan 2021 to 30th June 2024					
County	2021	2022	2023	2024	Total
Argyll and Bute	0	0	9	20	29
Bedfordshire	16	15	102	49	182
Berkshire	0	0	3	2	5
Buckinghamshire	1	3	17	14	35
Cambridgeshire	148	56	27	9	240
Cumbria	0	2	31	12	45
Derbyshire	0	0	0	14	14
Dorset	0	0	2	3	5
Durham	0	0	34	0	34
East Riding of Yorkshire	0	0	1	0	1
East Sussex	0	15	18	6	39
Essex	8	19	35	32	94
Hampshire	0	0	1	5	6
Hertfordshire	3	2	7	5	17
Kent	0	2	42	21	65
Leicestershire	0	2	4	7	13
Lincolnshire	50	101	170	198	519
London North	0	0	2	11	13
Norfolk	87	34	6	0	127
North Yorkshire	0	0	4	0	4
Northamptonshire	1	9	25	26	61
Northumberland	0	0	2	0	2
Nottinghamshire	0	0	3	35	38
Oxfordshire	0	0	7	1	8
Rutland	0	0	3	5	8
South Yorkshire	29	23	22	12	86
Staffordshire	9	18	16	36	79
Suffolk	27	8	4	0	39
Surrey	0	0	1	4	5
Tyne & Wear	0	0	1	0	1
West Sussex	0	3	13	13	29
West Yorkshire	0	0	0	11	11
Worcestershire	0	1	1	0	2
Total	379	313	614	550	1856

Water voles: Phoenix arises from the ashes

The single greatest motivation for removing mink from the English countryside is that they are known to be the main cause of the catastrophic water vole population decline in recent decades. Estimates vary, but there's general agreement that water voles have diminished by at least 95% across the country, and that they have been completely extinguished in some areas. Given this situation, two hugely important, linked questions follow, and are often asked of us: if mink are removed, will water voles recover and, if so, will they return naturally, or will they need artificial help in the form of human-controlled re-introduction?

Readers of this Newsletter series will know that WRT has already answered the first question, to the extent that water voles have become so common in some areas that we're having trouble keeping them out of our traps. Once mink have been vanquished, water voles often seem to materialise out of thin air, even in places where none have been recorded in years or decades. But are remnant water vole populations sufficiently widespread that they can reclaim all of the territory from which they were removed by mink?

One way to explore this question is to look at the geographical spread of water vole captures in our traps. The map shows where we have caught them in eastern England, and it's clear that this species has appeared across most of Norfolk, Suffolk and Cambs - the three counties where we have the best trap coverage and consequently the lowest density of mink. Of equal interest is where water voles have popped up in Lincolnshire, where we know mink are abundant, and where WRT



and partners have not long been deploying traps in any number. Even here, water voles are appearing in many of the areas with mink traps, and have clearly been able to cling on, albeit in small numbers. Evidence from the Bourne Brook in Cambridgeshire, and elsewhere, shows that water voles can recover lost territory remarkably quickly in the absence of mink, so we expect that they will now be able to spread and multiply in Lincs as the mink disappear. In contrast, Hertfordshire has had few water vole captures despite a reasonable spread of traps maintained by the Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust and WRT, so it does appear that this county's resident water voles did pretty much disappear under the mink onslaught.



Mink with water vole prey, North Lincolnshire

Each local water vole population is likely to be genetically distinct, so the complete loss of the species in an area is likely to diminish the genetic diversity of the UK meta-population, and consequently its long-term resilience. Equally, the increasingly frequent discovery and protection of 'lost' water vole populations after mink removal is a joy - a just reward for all the time and effort invested in mink trapping by volunteers and organisations alike, and an invaluable contribution to future-proofing Britain's water voles.

And finally, after an expected lull of some two months over the early summer, reports of mink sightings and catches have increased dramatically in the first two weeks of July, from one a day to five. This surge in activity is largely due to new broods of youngsters venturing away from the den in daylight, when they are seen by dog-walkers, boaters, and quite often homeowners like Jim Caton, who kindly reported a brood of mink on his patio in Warwickshire. This brood included a very unusual light brown kit, alongside its dark brown or 'standard' sibling (see right). Like all adventurous kids, they often get into trouble, and it's not unusual for us to receive photos of kits in kitchens at this time of year, having come in through a cat-flap. Two have done so recently - one (mentioned above by Simon) of its own volition, but the other less willingly, in the mouth of the cat flap's 'owner'.



Proving both that Nottinghamshire has lots of mink, and that I still have a lot to learn, Jack from the Notts Wildlife Trust, one of WRT's partner organisations, told me this week that he'd caught two adult male mink in the same trap just an hour apart. Never having heard of this in summer, I suggested to Jack that they were probably juveniles from a brood, but their body weight (each over 1.3 kg) left no doubt that he was right, and me wrong. What two adult males would be doing in the same place in daylight, just an hour apart and having not ventured into the trap before, is baffling. We learn something new every day.

I write this in seat 13D of an Easyjet flight from Inverness to Luton, on my way home from a very pleasant few days in the Outer Hebrides. My good friend Prof. Xavier Lambin and I have been looking at prospects for eradicating mink from this large (3,000 sq km), rugged and fairly remote archipelago - surely one of the most challenging parts of Britain for such an operation. When I first met Xavier, he did not believe it possible to eradicate mink from England, let alone western Scotland, so I was delighted to discover that he has seen the light, and does now believe that the prospect of a mink-free GB is feasible, albeit complex and difficult. Xavier has played a pioneering role in clearing mink from much of central Scotland, including the Cairngorms, and I suspect that WRT's collective success in England (and Lismore in western Scotland, of course) may have contributed to his conversion!

With my best wishes,

Tony Martin

Chair of the Waterlife Recovery Trust Board of Trustees



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