

## Water Voles

### Where can water voles be found and what are the signs they are present?

The presence of water voles should be checked for all development or maintenance involving riverside or other waterside habitats. This includes rivers, streams, canals, ditches, lakes and ponds. Such checks are necessary even though there have been few recent records of water voles in Devon.

Water voles particularly like bank-side sites with tall and highly-layered rushes, sedges and reeds. Their activity is largely confined to a few metres of the water's edge, but the length of territory may range from 30m to 300m.

Water voles are rarely seen, therefore surveys (in the summer) should be based on the presence of characteristic signs, such as droppings, latrines, feeding stations, burrows and footprints.

### What are the statutory requirements for protecting water voles?

Legal protection has been given in recognition that habitat loss and destruction has played the greatest role in the significant decline in water voles in recent decades – more so than direct persecution.

Under the [Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981](#), there is statutory protection for the water vole's place of shelter or protection although it does not protect the voles themselves. It is an offence to:

- intentionally or recklessly damage, destroy or obstruct access to any structure or place which water voles use for shelter or protection
- intentionally or recklessly disturb water voles while they are using such a place.

A person is not guilty of an offence if it was the incidental result of a lawful operation (eg under planning permission) and it can be proved that it could not reasonably be avoided. However, reasonable steps must be taken to avoid necessary damage, for example through appropriate mitigation.

In order to avoid a potential offence, prior checks should be made for signs of water voles in areas where they might be found. This should ideally be undertaken before determination of the planning application.

Licences are available from DEFRA to allow activities that would otherwise be offences. Licences will only be issued for the purpose of preserving public health, preventing the spread of disease or preventing serious damage to any form of property or to fisheries. However, it is important to note that licences are not issued for development or maintenance operations which intentionally destroy water vole burrows.

If possible, development should be planned to avoid water vole habitats. Water voles confine most of their activities to within a few metres of water. Therefore, it may be possible to leave undeveloped areas around ponds, or wildlife corridors along ditches or streams.

If this is not possible, it may be acceptable to create alternative water vole habitats on or near the site. Failing this, translocation of water voles may be necessary.

## **What opportunities are there for mitigation and additional wildlife gains for water voles?**

Bank-side vegetation can be managed to be suitable water vole habitat. Unsympathetic weedcutting or mowing removes cover and food. Mowing should leave patches of uncut vegetation of varying lengths. On the other hand, unmanaged scrubbed-over banks are also unsuitable.

Habitat enhancement can be incorporated into development and enhancement schemes. Restoration of vegetated bank-side corridors to link fragmented populations could help to reverse local population declines or improve the viability of small populations.

## **Where should I go for further information?**

English Nature. 2001. Water vole: guidance for planners and developers. This leaflet can be downloaded from [English Nature's website](#)