

NORTHWEST LOWLANDS WATER VOLE PROJECT

Executive Summary, June 2011



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Executive Summary

The water vole is Britain's fastest declining native mammal and is subsequently a UK Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) Priority Species and received increased protection under UK wildlife legislation in 2008. Declines are attributed to changes in land-use, riparian management and predation by the introduced American mink (Strachan 2004). Limited evidence available prior to the commencement of the Northwest Lowlands Water Vole Project (NWLWVP) suggested that healthy populations existed within the project area, but no initiatives were in place to ensure this remained the case.

Covering parts of Lancashire, North Merseyside, Greater Manchester and Cheshire, the project brings together a wide partnership of organisations. It was developed to gather accurate baseline data on current water vole distributions within the project area, to ensure these distributions are maintained and enhanced, and to highlight the importance of the project area for water vole conservation at a national scale. The project was funded, primarily by the SITA Trust - Enriching Nature Programme and the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, from April 2008 to March 2011. This report details the work achieved during this period. Whichever direction the project takes beyond March 2011, the past three years have provided a solid base of survey work, habitat improvements/creation and mink control, and made a significant contribution to water vole conservation in the Northwest.

Project Outputs - Survey:

Surveys have been carried out at 630 sites across the project area, covering approximately 2066km², following the standard survey methodology. Water vole status at sites has been classified into three categories: *absence*, *possible presence* and *presence*.

- Water vole *presence* was found at 37% of sites
- Water vole *possible presence* was found at 17% of sites
- Water vole *absence* was found at 46% of sites
- In addition, otter signs were found at only 1%, and mink signs were found at 6% of sites

Project Outputs - Habitat and Management:

- 51 sites provided with recommendations and advice

- 14 sites provided with habitat improvements via project partners
- 11 management plans contributed towards
- 9 area identified for mink control
- 2 mink control programmes implemented in Cheshire with BASC
- Demonstrated return of water voles to Goway following mink control
- 54 mink removed from the project area

Project Outputs – Wider Engagement:

- 170 volunteers trained and recruited
- 26 independent survey volunteers
- 393 volunteer survey days

Principal Findings

Results indicate that water voles may have been lost from up to 56% of previously occupied sites within the Northwest Lowlands over the last 10 years, indicating that the national decline in water vole populations is continuing to affect the project area significantly.

Mosslands and agricultural drainage ditches proved to be valuable habitats for water voles, along with sites that were dominated by reeds/sedges/rushes and tall grass.

Sites where trees/bushes, short grass and non-native invasive herbs were prevalent offered the least suitable habitat for water voles.

High levels of *presence* were found on the highly suitable agricultural drainage ditches of the Alt & Crossens catchment and along the Leeds & Liverpool Canal. This area has been termed the *West Lancashire & North Merseyside Agricultural Plain* and has been put forward as being of *national importance* for the conservation of water voles.

The lasting legacy of the project is a comprehensive baseline of water vole distribution within the project area. This baseline data will inform potential developments and habitat works, and can be used as a tool, which future changes can be monitored against.

Future Work

The regional Steering Group is keen to enable future water vole conservation projects to continue within the region beyond March 2011.

Both the project's hosting organisations, Cheshire Wildlife Trust and the Wildlife Trust for Lancashire, Manchester & North Merseyside, are keen to develop continuation plans, either in

the form of capital works on sites identified by this project in order to improve habitat connectivity, and/or through surveying beyond the current project area to extend the baseline data.

The project work also points to some key considerations and best practice to be incorporated into future plans:

- Identification of key sites for connectivity and habitat work where populations are isolated, fragmented and/or absent.
- Continued push for designation of key sites, at a national level, and within Local Wildlife Site systems.
- Professional training and support promotes volunteer retention and can develop competent independent surveyors, therefore increasing capacity for wildlife recording.
- Contribution made by volunteers, work placements and local groups to survey effort can be significant.
- A central and public face for expertise, advice and training is beneficial.
- There is a need for a landscape scale action framework.
- Co-ordination is needed for large scale mink and invasive species control.
- Baseline for UK BAP Priority Species targets and contributions to achieving national and local BAP targets.