

WATER VOLES: INFORMATION FOR I.O.W LANDOWNERS

Photo Terry Whittacker



This advice sheet sets out some of the simple things that you can do to help them and ensure that the I.O.W continues to be a special refuge for Water voles.

Water Voles are one of the fastest declining mammals in Britain and in many areas their numbers have dropped by over 90% in the past 30 years. The main reasons for decline are loss of and changes to their habitat and predation by American Mink.

Fortunately, the lack of Mink on the Isle of Wight has helped to protect Island Water voles from the worst of these declines and we are now a potential UK stronghold for this species. Yet, we know from repeated surveys that Island Water vole populations are still fragile and susceptible to loss from habitat degradation and fragmentation. Indeed, they have recently been lost from parts of the Island.

What do Water voles need to thrive?

They can be found living along the banks of rivers, streams, ditches and ponds where there is plenty of lush, tall wetland plant growth and also within fens, marshes and reed beds. Wetland plants are used as both a food source and a place to hide from predators. Some woody plants such as willow, hawthorn, elder and bramble are eaten in the winter.

Earth banks are used for burrows where they nest and take refuge from predators and high water levels.

They can't move far across open, dry or urbanised land so require an interconnected network of suitable wetland corridors in order to thrive.



Research has shown that the wider the fringe of marginal vegetation, the higher the density of water voles.

Are Water Voles Protected by the Law?

Yes, since 2008 they have been fully protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended). This makes it illegal to kill, injure or take a water vole; damage, destroy or obstruct access to any structure or place which water voles use for shelter or protection or to disturb a water vole while it is using such a place.

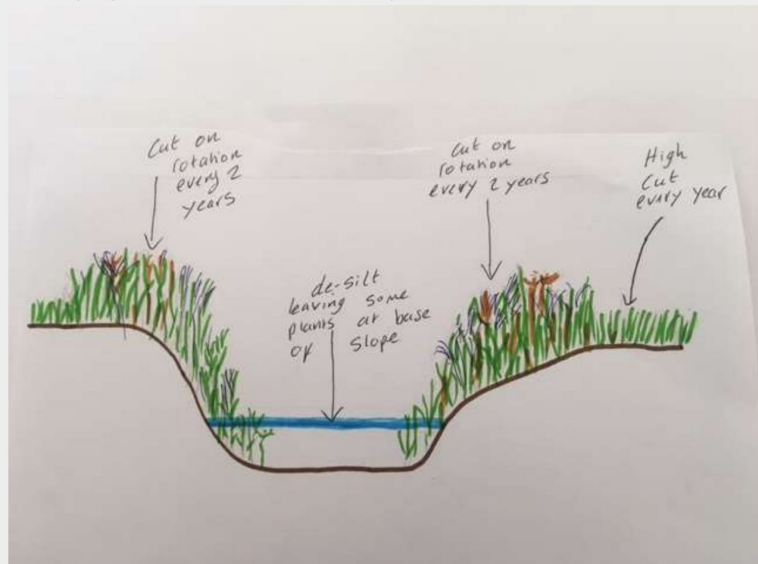
In practice, the intention of the law is not to prevent routine maintenance works in all areas used by Water voles but due attention should be made and appropriate actions taken to minimise risk of harm. Short-term disturbance which allows the species to flee and then return within a short time period e.g. a day, will not normally be considered a problem.

What can I do to help Water Voles on my land?

- **Cut alternate banks each year or cut in sections, so there is always an uncut refuge for the water voles to escape to. Ideally leave around one third uncut each year. A self-sustaining population (30 females) requires a minimum of 2km good quality bankside habitat.**
- **Only carry out any bankside cutting in the late autumn or winter. Water voles depend on tall, uncut wetland banks throughout the spring and summer. Consider setting the flail bar high to retain 10-15cm of vegetation over the winter.**
- **Graze or flail mow every two years to control woody vegetation. Water voles will avoid sites that are heavily over-shaded by dense scrub or trees and this management will encourage a thick bankside grass cover for Water voles.**
- **De-silt ditches as infrequently as possible, without affecting the drainage function. Where there is vegetation growing in the ditch or stream, ideally leave untouched gaps of 10-20m as refuge areas.**

Managing ditch and stream banks for Water voles

Where livestock graze ditch or stream banks short in the summer, consider using temporary fencing to allow bankside margins to grow tall. Fencing could then be removed every couple of years in late summer to allow light grazing and prevent dense scrub from developing.



Enhancements for Water Voles

Wetland features such as ponds, reed beds and back waters in the floodplain provide excellent habitat for Water voles (and other wildlife) and can act as important connections between otherwise fragmented water vole populations.

- Ponds at least 1m deep could be created within a floodplain buffer zone or by widening junctions between ditches, or by placing boards or bunds within ditches so that some depth of water is retained in the summer months.
- Opening up sections of the bank to the sun by coppicing and pollarding bankside trees in densely shaded areas, will encourage grasses and herbs to grow, providing food and cover for water voles.

For further advice and information please contact Island Rivers Co-ordinator,

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