

WATER VOLE



What do they look like?

Water voles have rounded bodies about 20cm long, with blunt noses, chestnut-brown fur, short rounded ears and a long hair-covered tail. The largest member of the British vole family they used to be a common sight crouching at the water's edge or swimming close to the banks.

They can look similar to brown rats which also sometimes live near streams, and in fact are sometimes called, incorrectly, water rats. Brown rats are about the same size as water voles but they have more pointed faces, more noticeable ears and longer, almost hairless tails. They are much bolder than water voles

How else might I recognise one?

Water voles leave their droppings in latrines. These often show as a trampled mass of hardened old droppings with fresh ones on top. Water vole droppings look like small cylinders with blunt ends, and have no smell. Water vole burrows appear as holes in the bank usually within 3m of water.

Classification

Kingdom: Animalia
Phylum: Vertebrata
Class: Mammalia
Order: Rodentia
Family: Microtidae
Genus: *Arvicola*
Species: *A. amphibius*

Water voles normally measure 4 to 8 cm across, and are often wider than they are high. You might also see lawns of closely cropped grass near the burrows.

They sometimes leave characteristic tracks in mud flats close to the water. The forefoot has four toes which leave a distinctive star shaped pattern, while the hind foot has five toes with the first and fifth toes leaving prints almost at right angles to the three central toes.

What do they eat?

Green, waterside vegetation especially float-grass, reed, reed grass, nuts, underground stems of horsetails, bark and twigs. In winter they eat roots including rootcrops and rhizomes.



Where do they live?

They are found mainly along the banks of slow moving water courses, such as ditches, streams and rivers, but they do need a varied supply of vegetation to provide food and cover. Burrows are dug into the banks, often in quite elaborate networks with underwater entrances.

Why are they special to Worcestershire?

Abundant in Worcestershire in the 1970s, the water vole has suffered a significant decline and is rare and possibly close to extinction in the county.

A national survey in 1989-90 failed to find water voles in 67% of sites where previously recorded, and it is estimated that this decline will rise to 94% within the next five years.

A survey in 2001 of 100 locations in Worcestershire where water voles had previously been recorded found only approximately 10% of sites still occupied. It is not known whether populations are stable at this level, or declining further. Most of the positive sightings were in Bromsgrove District, and work has started to improve the habitat near the remaining populations.

Problems and solutions?

Current factors affecting water voles include:

- loss of habitat through river engineering, bank protection and maintenance works which don't take into account the needs of water voles
- predation from american mink
- pollution and poisoning of water supplies, and reduction in river flows

Did you know?

Ratty from 'Wind in the Willows' was actually a water vole. Water voles are very short sighted. You could bring your face to within 30 cm of a vole's face, looking into its eyes and it would go on eating!

What can I do to help?

You can see that water voles' problems include pollution and reduction of water supplies. The Fact Sheets about crayfish and shad suggest things that we can all do to reduce these problems. There is something else. Everything that we buy or use has needed water to make it. This means that the more items we buy rather than re-use the less water there is and the dirtier water becomes. Being sensible about our purchases can help all water life enormously! If you are taking dogs for a walk do not allow them to disturb habitats on stream and river banks.

An example of a food chain

reed ➡ water vole ➡ mink

Find out more?

Water Voles by R.Strachan Whittet Books 1997 ISBN 1 873580 339 is a lovely book suitable for KS2 up to adult. Out of print but libraries will have it.

The Mammal Society have a series of fact sheets on their web-site including one on the water vole. <http://www.abdn.ac.uk/mammal/facts.htm>

They also produce a booklet The Water Vole by G Woodroffe, Mammal Society Series. The Last Water Vole by Mike Cox, The story of Britain's fastest-disappearing mammal, and one man's search to find them.

BBC Wildfacts include a factfile on the water vole.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/nature/wildfacts/factfiles>

Further copies of this factsheet can be downloaded from www.worcestershire.gov.uk/biodiversity

