

Suffolk Water Vole Conservation and Mink Control Project



NEWSLETTER No 14

April 2020

Once again Suffolk Wildlife Trust would like to thank all mink trappers for your continued commitment to the project which has now been going for eighteen years. In 2019 there were 112 known mink captures which is marginally up on the 2018 captures. The total known captures since the project started is 3661. We can never assume a river is mink free and the trapping results for the last two years show a sustained increase in trapped mink since 2015. Our precarious water vole populations are constantly at risk from mink predation so please do keep your rafts active.

Focus on trappers: Nicky Rowbottom from the Halesworth Millenium Green Trust tells their story:

Persistence pays and volunteers are great!

Mink trapping started in Halesworth in 2003 when Linda Owen volunteered to join the scheme, attended one of Penny's training courses, and installed a mink trap in a tucked away place on a tributary of the River Blyth, where it passes through the Millennium Green. The Green is owned by a Trust, managed by volunteers and loved and used by hundreds of local people. On a public open space like this, with a very high number of walkers - with and without dogs - it's important to choose the monitoring site carefully. The Trustees were totally happy with the mink trapping but keen to keep the necessity for publicity about it to a minimum.

During the ten years Linda monitored the traps 5 mink were caught. There were no sightings nor signs of mink in Halesworth after this for several years, but happily water vole thrived along the river and are frequently seen. The Millennium Green/Blyth Otter Group volunteers joined in the mink monitoring scheme again, at Penny's invitation, in October 2018 in an effort to protect our water vole populations. We installed a new raft and the clay pad was checked regularly at first, but an equally good method was established using a trail camera.

We have been monitoring several locations for otters on the Blyth and its tributaries around Halesworth since April 2017 using trail cameras. A mink showed up on several cameras in September 2019: on the raft itself and in three other locations nearby. We swung into action, moved the raft (plus trap) to a quiet location - visible from our land but just outside it, where the catching and dispatching of an animal could be achieved more discreetly. Three volunteers took it in turns to check the trap daily until, at the end of October, the trap was sprung and a male mink caught and dealt with. Since then we have had no sightings of mink on the cameras but a recent rash of sightings of polecat-ferrets.



Volunteers from Halesworth Millenium Green Group siting the raft on the River Blyth and setting up the trail camera on the river bank
Photo: Nicky Rowbottom

MINK RAFT MAINTENANCE

Does your clay need replacing? If so let us know and we will get some more to you. It is important to make sure the clay is clean and free from vegetation so all animal tracks can be clearly recorded.

The Waterlife Recover Project East—a mink free East Anglia

A new regional group has been set up with the overall objective of eradicating mink from the eastern region. The project is spear headed by Professor Tony Martin who led a successful project to eradicate rats and mice from the island of South Georgia in the South Pacific so has the necessary expertise to steer us in the right direction. The project steering group includes representatives of major stakeholder bodies (both Government and NGO) who are already involved with or interested in mink control and Penny Hemphill is representing SWT. Suffolk and Norfolk will be the core area for eradication with Essex and Cambridgeshire providing the buffer zone. The idea, providing we are successful in getting the necessary funding, is to support existing mink trapping projects throughout the region and provide “smart traps” to all existing and new trappers at a distance of 2km apart along the rivers. Smart traps are simply the existing raft and trap with the addition of a Remoti unit. Remoti units are an electronic device which, when a trap is triggered, can send the user an email and/or a text via a web server. They are proven to be reliable and SWT site managers have

now been successfully using them for the last year. See <http://www.remotisystems.com/> for more information on the units. Photo to the left shows trap with Remoti unit.



Photo: Tony Martin

The Stour Valley Farmer Cluster

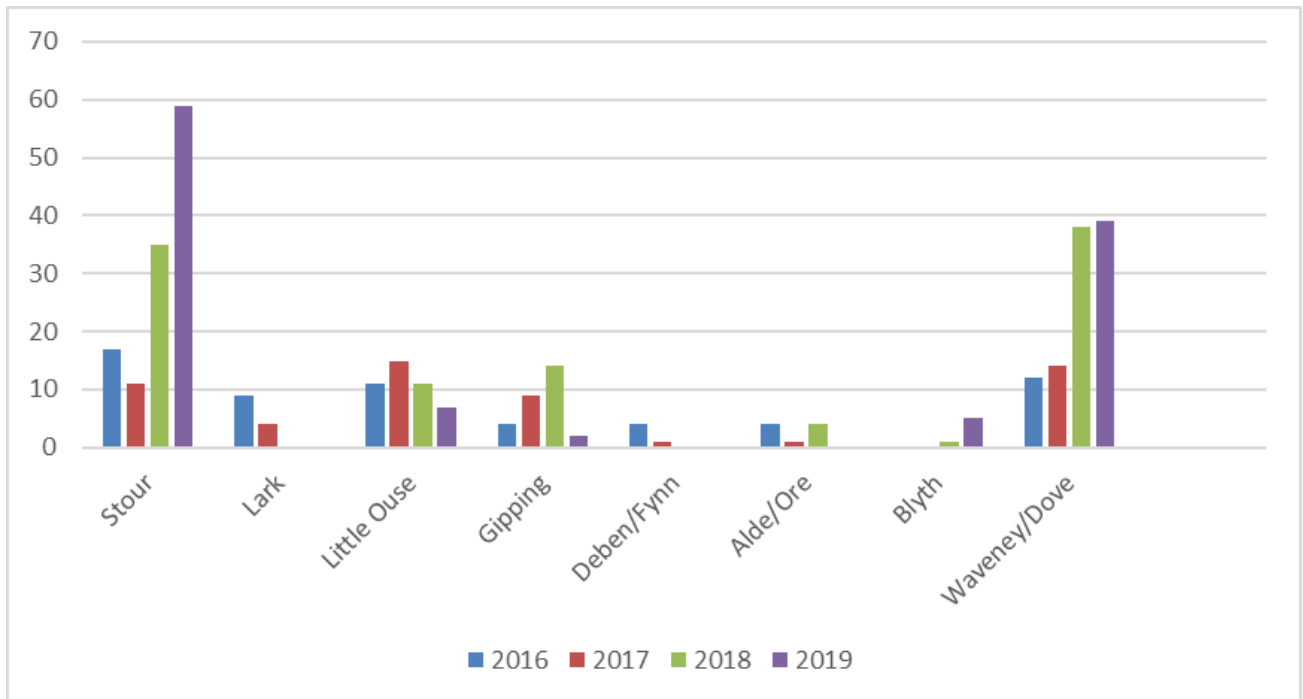
An excellent way to increase mink trapping in a river catchment is through farm clusters —Nick Oliver explains

The farmer clusters concept was developed by the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust with the support of Natural England. It is a landscape scale initiative where a group of landowners work together with advice from conservation advisers to improve their land for wildlife. The Stour Valley farmer cluster covers an area of 20,000 acres within and bordering the Dedham Vale AONB and were keen to carry out mink control to benefit water voles. After an initial meeting in September to gauge interest, a further meeting was held in October for those people who would be operating the mink traps. Tony Martin attended the latter and gave us a valuable insight into the use of ‘remoti units’ as an aid to trap mink. Funding allocated to the farmer cluster from Suffolk Wildlife Trust allowed fourteen remoti units to be purchased, the majority of which were deployed with traps and rafts at a distance of approximately 2km apart in November. In 2019, 2 mink were caught (near Langham and Boxford) and water voles have been caught and released at Stoke by Nayland, Boxted, Boxford, Bures and East Bergholt. A further four Remoti units for the Stour cluster have been kindly donated by the National Trust.



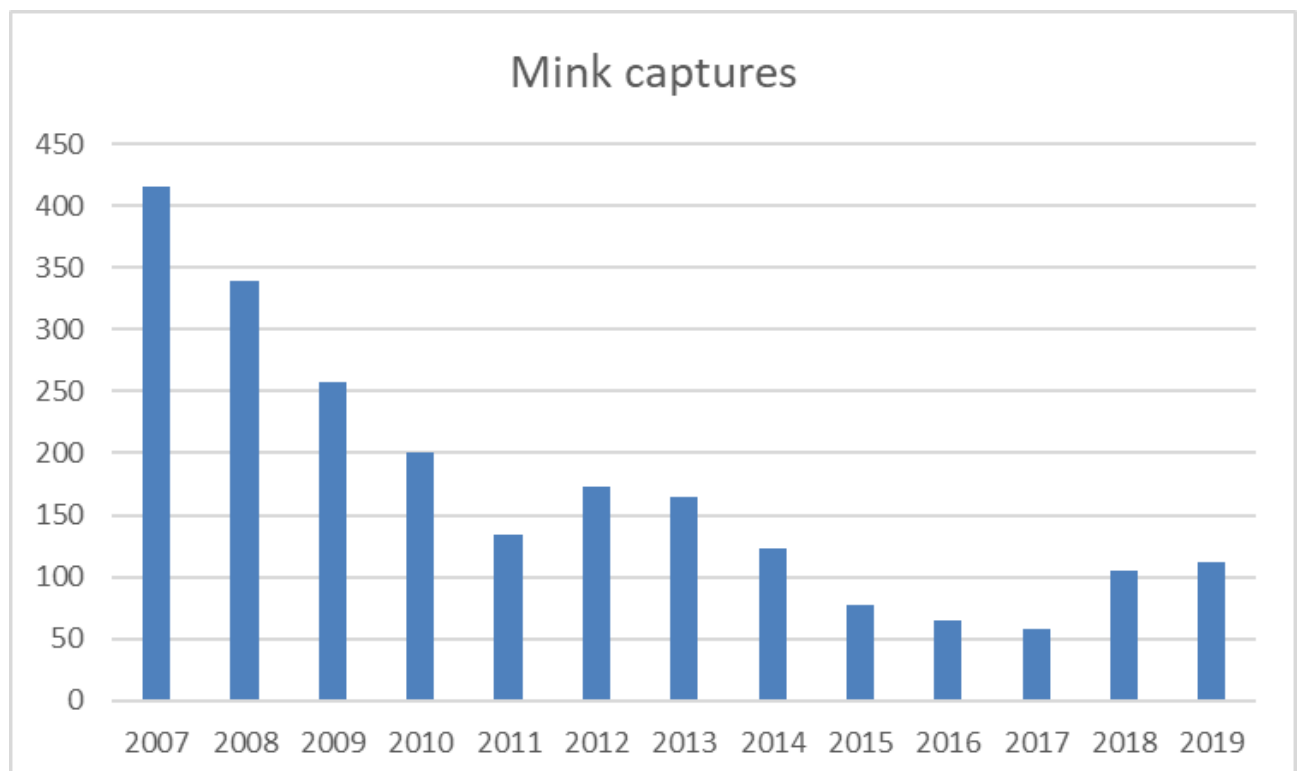
The use of trail cameras to detect mink is proving very reliable. These photographs of the Halesworth Millenium Green mink caught on camera on different days at different locations. Kindly supplied by the Millenium Green Group

Mink trapping results



The chart above shows trapping results for the last four years with the county boundary rivers achieving the highest number of trapped mink (Waveney, Little Ouse and Stour). The 2019 results show a slight increase in trapped mink indicating that the animals are still increasing. However the fact that no mink were trapped on the Deben or Alde in 2019 shows that possibly the animals are not as widespread throughout these river catchments as in past years. We would never say a river is mink free, however if the Waterlife Recover Project East is able to support our work, it may be that in time these two rivers can be proven to have eradicated mink. To achieve this there are various objectives to meet and we will keep you informed on any advancement in this project but it could be our exit strategy and this has eluded us for years.

The chart below shows trapping results from 2007—2019. It shows the upward trend once again of the trapping results over the last two years.



Animal welfare

- It is a legal requirement to check traps at least once every twenty-four hours
- Dispose of the body by burying it to a depth of 0.5m
- Ensure your trap has an otter exclusion guard attached to avoid inadvertently trapping a young otter
- Remember it is illegal to release mink back into the wild

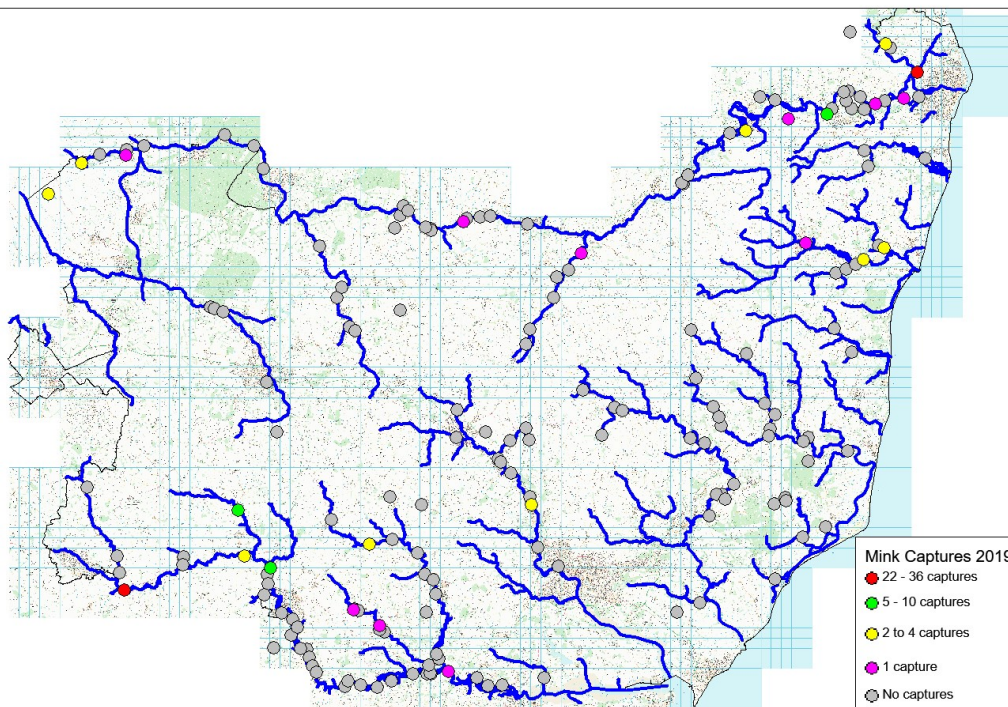
Funding

We are very fortunate to have the continued support of the Environment Agency, Essex & Suffolk Water, Anglian Water and East Suffolk Drainage Alliance which has enabled us to continue co-ordinating the project since 2002. Many thanks to these organisations. There is no doubt that this is a long term project and continued monitoring is essential to ensure we continue to protect water voles. **So please keep your rafts active.**

Mink Captures 2019

Scale 1:465556

Suffolk Wildlife Trust
Brooke House
The Green
Ashbocking, IP6 9JY



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Covid 19: As with many organisations SWT staff are working at home and field work is reduced in line with current Government guidelines. However mink control is exempt from these restrictions as it is considered to be pest control. It is therefore possible for you to continue running your rafts and traps and we would encourage you to do so if you are comfortable with that. At present we are unable to make any site visits so cannot bring you new rafts or traps or undertake training. However if you require replacement equipment please get in touch so we can visit when the restrictions are eased. Many thanks.

Need help?

If you need more information, a site visit or a mink raft please do contact Penny Hemphill or Nick Oliver at:

Suffolk Wildlife Trust, Brooke House
Ashbocking, Ipswich
IP6 9JY
Tel 01473 890089