

Suffolk Water Vole Conservation and Mink Control Project



NEWSLETTER No 15

June 2021

To all mink trappers, we would like to apologise for the slightly belated Mink newsletter this year. As you may have heard, our esteemed Project Officer Penny Hemphill retired at the start of this year and our new Project Officer, Alice Wickman, has been very active with the new regional mink eradication project, more information on this project to follow.

Once again Suffolk Wildlife Trust would like to thank all mink trappers for your continued commitment to the project, which has been running for 19 years.

In 2020 there were 59 known mink captures, which is down from 112 in 2019. The total known captures since the project started is 3720.

Although numbers are down from last year, our precarious water vole populations are constantly at risk from mink predation so please do keep your rafts active.



Water vole, photo by Margaret Holland

MINK RAFT MAINTENANCE

Does your clay need replacing? If so let us know and we will get some more to you. Please also remember to check your trap mechanism and rope tether are sound every two or three months.

Hello from our new Project Officer, Alice Wickman

Hello mink trappers, I am the new Project Officer, leading the mink control project in Suffolk. I have worked for Suffolk Wildlife Trust for two years, focussing on a catchment-scale river restoration project on the River Blyth in East Suffolk. Before this I worked for several other conservation organisations, always focusing on river and wetland conservation. I have a passion for rivers and freshwater wildlife and have a keen interest in dragonflies.

I recently took over from Penny and I now lead on the water vole conservation and mink control project in Suffolk, as well as our other river-related work. My role at the Trust is Wilder Rivers Adviser and you are welcome to get in touch with me regarding anything to do with mink control, water vole conservation, or river habitats in general.

I am looking forward to getting to know you all and hearing your mink trapping stories.

My contact details are below:

Email: alice.wickman@suffolkwildlifetrust.org

Mobile: 07826 897009



Our new Wilder Rivers Adviser, Alice Wickman

The Waterlife Recovery East Project — a mink free East Anglia

As mentioned in the previous newsletter, a new regional group has been set up with the overall objective of eradicating mink from the eastern region, now known as Waterlife Recovery East.



The project recently received funding to supply new smart rafts to trappers, which will be the first step towards mink eradication. Smart rafts 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. The smart rafts therefore only need to be checked when an alert is received, rather than every day, as is required for the traditional setup. This means that the smart rafts can be positioned in remote areas, allowing us to cover new ground. The smart rafts can also save the user a lot of time and are better for animal welfare.

Suffolk and Norfolk make up the core area for the eradication project with Essex and Cambridgeshire providing a buffer zone. Suffolk Wildlife Trust has received over 75 of the new smart rafts to distribute across Suffolk and our partner organisations, The Countryside Restoration Trust in Cambridgeshire, and The Norfolk Rivers Trust in Norfolk, have been given a similar number to distribute in their respective regions. Essex Wildlife Trust will be covering their area of the buffer zone with an additional funding pot.

Smart rafts are an amazing resource but we have a limited number at present so we have to be strategic about where they are placed for best results. We want to focus on positioning the rafts at optimal sites, including new areas that would be hard to access every day, sites where mink have recently been reported, and/ or sites with optimal mink habitat. If you are interested in taking on a new smart raft, please get in touch with Alice (contact details can be found on page one) and she will be able to discuss with you whether your site may be suitable. Alice may also get in touch with some of you directly soon regarding the possibility of placing a smart raft at your site.

We hope that we will receive more funding in the future to gradually replace all of the existing rafts with the new smart raft set-up but in the meantime, those of you with the traditional set-up please continue your great work. Also, the smart rafts will not work at every site because the technology relies on mobile phone signal, therefore a combination of smart and traditional mink rafts will always be used.

Keeping us up-to-date

Knowledge is power and the more we know about the mink in our region, the more we can focus and target our trapping effort. Therefore, we ask if you could now let us know about your trap captures as soon as they happen, rather than annually, so that we can keep up-to-date with mink activity in the region as we work towards eradication.

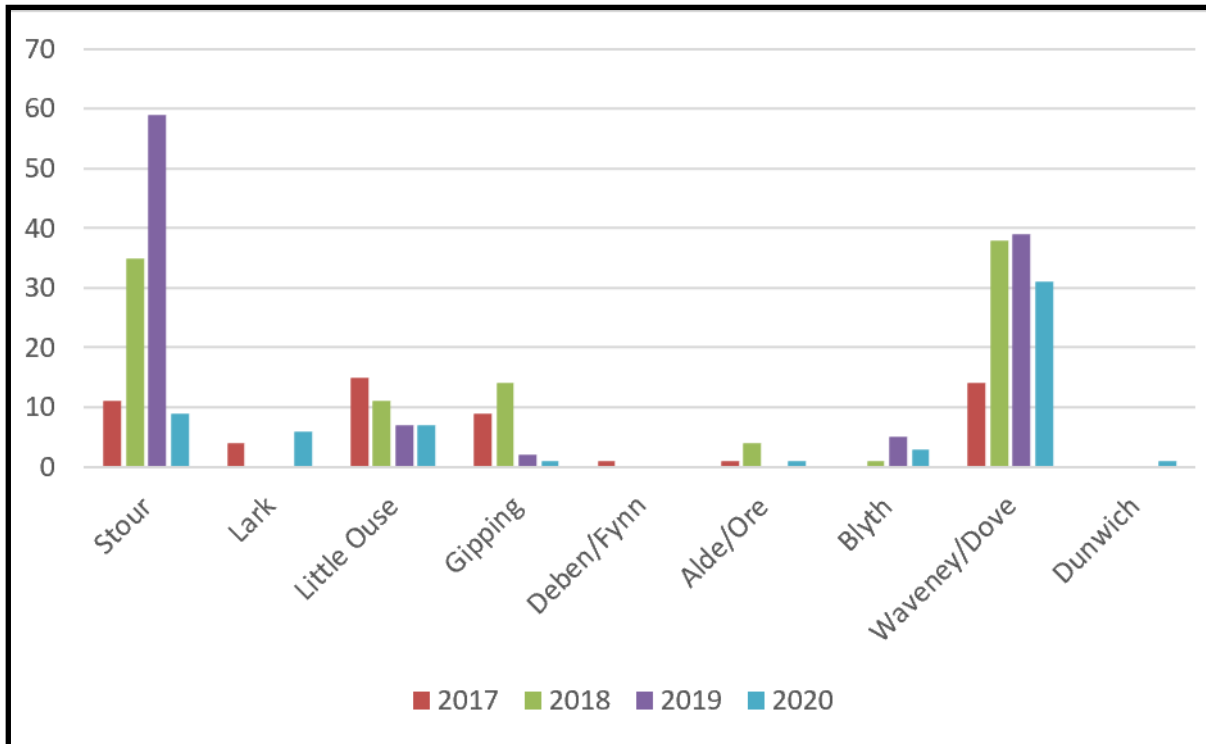


One of the new smart rafts in position. The new rafts are made of plastic and the polystyrene is encased inside, making these new rafts more durable.

In addition, we now aim to collect tissue samples from every mink caught or found dead in the region for DNA analysis conducted by the Department of Zoology at Cambridge University. This research will help us learn more about the mink in East Anglia, including how they are related and how they are moving around the region.

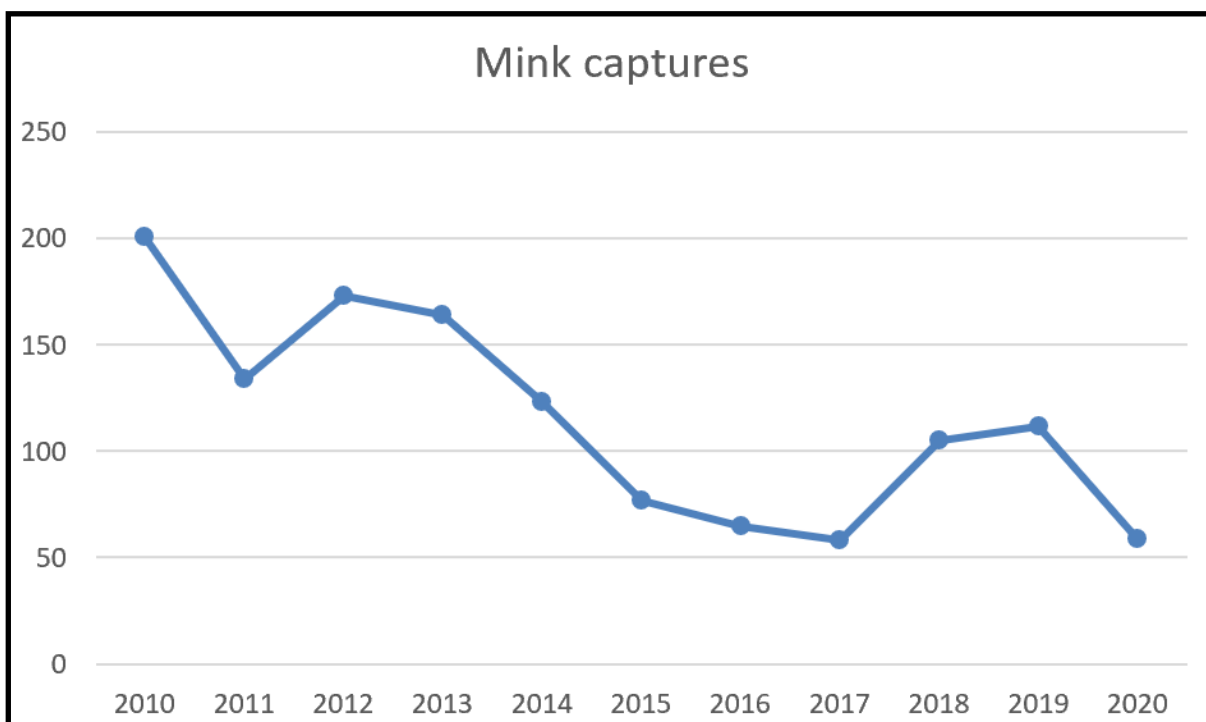
If possible, please could you email or telephone Alice as soon as possible after a mink has been caught and dispatched at your site. If you keep hold of the body, Alice will come to collect a tissue sample or talk you through how to do this yourself. The important thing is to remember not to dispose of the mink right away as it is now a useful resource! When you call it would also be helpful if you could tell us where and when you caught the mink and if possible, the sex, weight, and length of the animal. However, Alice can collect this information if she comes to collect a tissue sample. We also ask if you could report any mink sightings or road-kill to us.

Mink Trapping Results



The graph above shows trapping results from the last four years with the county boundary rivers achieving the highest number of trapped mink (Waveney, Little Ouse, and Stour). The 2020 results show a slight decrease in trapped mink on most river catchments. No mink were caught on the Deben in 2020 and very low numbers were caught on the Gipping, Alde, and Blyth. This suggests that most of the mink caught in Suffolk are coming in from our boundary counties. With the new smart raft technology, the central Suffolk/ coastal rivers could be the first to eradicate mink.

The graph below shows trapping results from 2010-2021. It shows that after the rise in mink captures in 2018 and 2019, numbers are beginning to fall again. However, we must continue trapping so that mink numbers do not rise again.



Animal welfare

- If you do not have a smart trap, it is a legal requirement to check traps at least once every twenty-four hours
- Please check smart traps within 10 hours of receiving an alert or as soon as possible in daylight hours
- 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 co-ordinate the project since 2002. Many thanks to these organisations.

Thanks also to our partners in the Waterlife Recovery East Project and funding from the Heritage Lottery Green Recovery Fund.

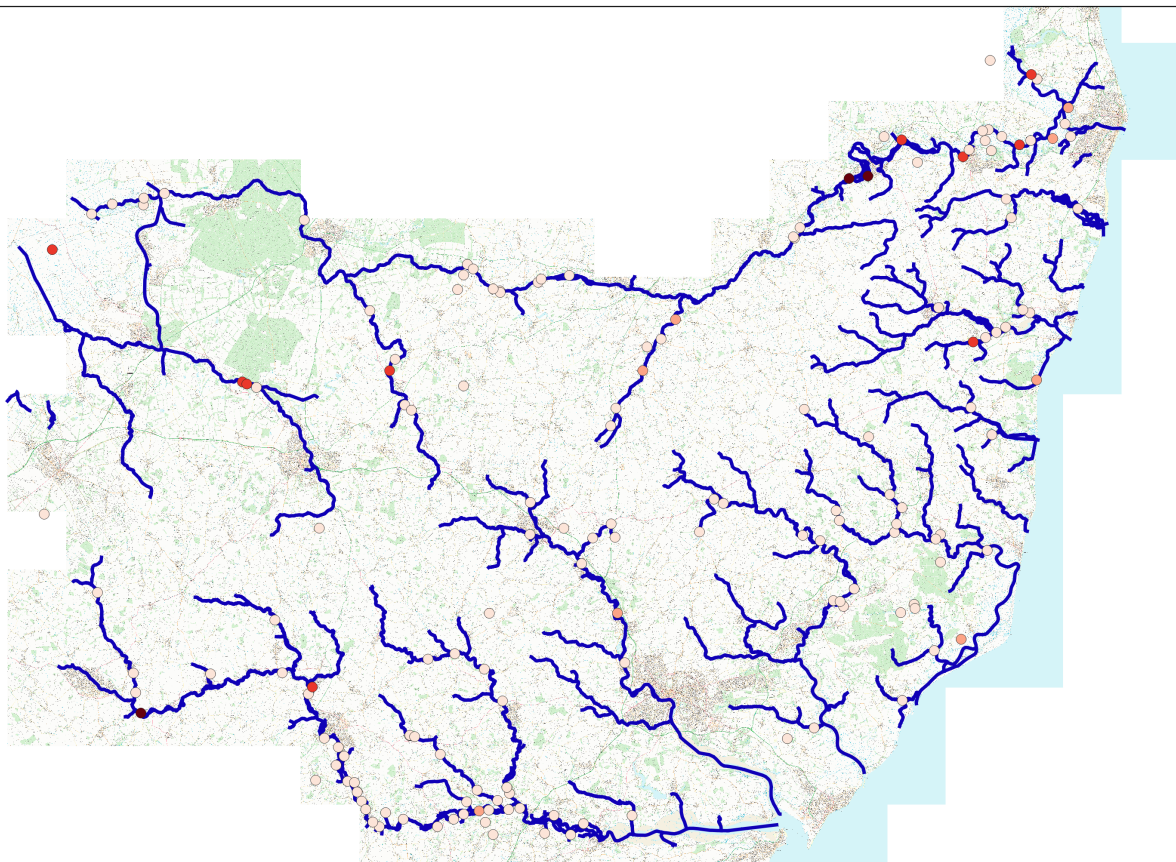
There is no doubt that this is a long-term project and continued monitoring is essential to ensure we continue to protect water voles, so please keep your rafts active.

Mink Captures 2020

Scale 1:389642



- Key:**
- No captures
 - 1 capture
 - 2-4 captures
 - 5-10 captures



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Covid 19:

Mink control is still exempt from any Covid 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.

Please refer to the updated general risk assessment for more information.

Old rafts:

If you have an old mink raft that you are no longer using, please let us know, as we would be happy to collect it for recycling. It is important to us that old/ broken rafts are not littering the river.

Need help?

If you need more information, a site visit, or a mink raft please contact Alice Wickman or Nick Oliver at:

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