

# Smart traps bring deadly mink to heel

**Will Humphries**  
Countryside Correspondent

They have cut a deadly swathe through British wildlife since escaping fur farms last century. But the tide is finally turning against the American mink thanks to a remarkable team of volunteers and the latest technology.

Smart traps are now in place across a quarter of England and genetic analysis shows that the invasive species is not recolonising areas from which they have been cleared. Such is the success that some volunteers believe that mink could be eradicated in Britain entirely.

Thousands of American mink escaped into the wild during the 1960s and have since wreaked havoc on native species. The number of water voles, immortalised by Ratty in Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows*, has fallen by 90 per cent in the past 40 years.

But in the past three years conservationists and volunteers from the Waterlife Recovery Trust have removed mink completely from East Anglia. No mink have been caught in their 500 traps for

duced the number of trap visits by 98 per cent and enabled the hundreds of volunteers to cover vast areas.

Bill Amos, professor of evolutionary genetics at Cambridge University, said: "It's a huge area and we have actually started reusing traps from East Anglia. That is really extraordinary, given all the concerns before the project with people saying this won't work because mink will recolonise."

Amos has led the genetics analysis of the more than 1,600 mink caught in traps, which he said showed they did not tend to travel far.

He said: "We put a lot of genetic markers across every mink we trap and can work out pretty much where it was born. What you find is that almost all mink — 90 to 95 per cent — were caught within 15 to 20km of where they were born and most were under 5km. This wasn't known before we started this project. We now know that actually they are not going to recolonise [cleared areas] that fast. That means we can keep track of them, certainly in England."

Amos said that farmers were in tears as water voles returned to their land for the first time in decades. Once mink have been vanquished, water voles often seem to materialise out of thin air, even in places where none have been recorded for decades.

The East Anglia eradication cost only £500,000, with one paid project officer organising a team of hundreds of volunteer trappers.

Tony Martin, emeritus professor of conservation at the University of Dundee, has led the effort under the banner of the Waterlife Recovery Trust. Natural England has now spent £500,000 on the new scheme ranging from the Thames to Lincoln. But to clear the entire country of mink, which it says is a realistic goal, more money is needed.

Amos said: "We do now need major funding because £500,000 doesn't go far if you are trying to employ a project officer and genetics and go country-wide. Tony [Martin] has estimated that it may cost £20 million to £30 million. If you just plough money into water vole releases when you haven't got rid of mink first then you are just going to end up with a lot of fat mink. Several of us have put in quite a lot of our own money. I have put in £30,000 out of my own pocket to pump-prime it. But it's such a worthwhile project and we are starting to get more and more funders involved."



## How it works



an entire year. After being captured the mink are killed and liquid from their glands is used to make scented lures.

With further funding and the help of wildlife charities and internal drainage boards, they have expanded their operations to cover 26 per cent of England in smart traps, from the Thames to Lincolnshire and the Midlands.

These floating cage traps send a text message and email whenever an animal is caught, meaning they do not need to be checked every day. This re-

## First beaver births in city sprawl for centuries

Two kits have been seen in a wetland in Ealing, making them the first beavers to be born in urban London for more than 400 years (Adam Vaughan writes).

The pair were noted by staff at Paradise Fields, a woodland surrounded by houses, a retail park and a Sainsbury's hub.

The kits will be the offspring of Eurasian beavers introduced to the site last autumn, and there may be more than the two seen so far.

"This is showing that beavers can live back in towns and cities," said

Sean McCormack, a vet and the founder of Ealing Wildlife Group, one of the conservation organisations involved in the project.

A kit was born last year in woods in a semi-rural part of Enfield, north London, but the Ealing family is the first in a built-up area.

Five adult beavers were released in October and they have built lodges, dams and new waterways.

"Beavers are nature's environmental engineers and it's very encouraging

to see what a positive change they've already had for communities and nature," said Sadiq Khan, the mayor of London, who helped to fund the scheme.

The Ealing beavers are not the only ones breeding in urban areas. Plymouth has reported a kit born in an enclosure within the city boundaries and other beaver enclosures exist from Cornwall to Cheshire.

The beaver boom is an improvement on a decade ago when wild beavers

were seen on the river Otter in Devon for the first time since the species was hunted to extinction in England in the 1500s.

Wild beaver releases remain unlawful despite Boris Johnson, the former prime minister, saying Britain should "build back beaver" when the idea went to a consultation in 2021.

Thérèse Coffey, who was an environment minister, was lukewarm on releases, telling conservationists that "there are more important things than beavers".

Ecologists hope that Steve Reed, the environment secretary, will be more receptive to wild releases of the animals. They have been found to improve water quality and reduce flood risk because of how they shape the ecosystem.



Adult beavers were released at the site in Ealing last year and now the kits have been spotted. Staff say it is possible there are more than two

# Britons cut back on clothes and eating out to afford their holidays

**Charlie Parker**

Britons are still splashing out on holidays but cutting back on shopping, eating out and going to festivals as financial pressures hit households, travel industry experts have said.

While signs of a travel slowdown are said to be surfacing in the US, the UK has seen overseas holidays "boosted" by bad weather at home.

Research by Abta, the UK trade body for tour operators and travel agents, found that more people were planning to go abroad this year than last year.

Consumers told the association that

they would reduce their discretionary spending elsewhere to afford their holidays. A survey of 2,000 people found that 57 per cent planned to cut back on eating out, while 46 per cent aimed to avoid leisure activities like festivals and 42 per cent said that they would buy fewer clothes, shoes and accessories.

More than half of respondents also said that they would spend "about the same" this year as they had during trips the year before, while 28 per cent said that they would spend even more now. Overall, 64 per cent of those surveyed said that they planned to travel this year, up from 61 per cent two years ago.

Graeme Buck, Abta's director of communications, said: "[Our] research continually finds that, even with pressure on household finances, people are very reluctant to cut back on their holidays. In particular, overseas holidays have been boosted by the largely wash-out summer we've had in the UK this year, with many customers looking for much more reliable sunshine."

Two million British holidaymakers were estimated to have headed overseas for the first weekend of the school summer holidays, between July 26 and 29. Spain remained the leading destination for families and there was also

strong demand for trips to Greece, Portugal, Turkey, Croatia, Italy, Malta and Cyprus. Longer haul, Florida and Dubai have been popular choices for British travellers.

Tour operators have also reported a shift in consumer habits over the past year, with all-inclusive breaks increasingly popular as holidaymakers look to "lock in" their costs.

A groundswell of people who would normally book 14 nights have instead been settling for ten, it was previously reported, while others took to "dropping a star" — staying somewhere a little cheaper — in an attempt to keep the

overall cost similar to that of last year.

Ed Pyke at Simpson Travel said: "The resounding message from our clients is that they are not willing to compromise on their annual holiday. Though they may be cutting back in other areas, their appetite for travel is stronger than ever post-pandemic."

Across the pond, however, the opposite seems to be true, where demand has been slowing, according to The Wall Street Journal. Expedia, Marriott, Airbnb and Hilton signalled in recent earnings results that many Americans were scrapping their holidays or choosing cheaper accommodation.