Waterlife Recovery Trust

NEWSLETTER 11

July 2025

YES, YES, BUT DOES IT REALLY *WORK*?

Those of us involved in the day-to-day WRT operation are very familiar with the evidence that American mink have destroyed most of Britain's water vole populations, have wiped out entire seabird colonies and are responsible for denuding waterways of ducklings, moorhens, cygnets and a host of other water-dependent prey species. We also rejoice in hearing of the recovery of these creatures once mink have been banished. To us, the beneficial results of mink eradication are clear and obvious, but I'm the first to accept that this isn't necessarily the case for everyone. Though the growing number of anecdotal stories of water voles bouncing back are encouraging and reassuring, we haven't had scientific proof of this. Until now, that is.

Collaboration with the University of Aberdeen, specifically with modeller Albert Bonet Bigata and Prof. Xavier Lambin has resulted in clear evidence that getting rid of American mink does indeed produce recovery in both the number and spread of water voles - the endangered small mammal that has been most drastically impacted by mink in recent decades. We will be publishing this evidence in a scientific journal soon, and we hope that this might spur Defra and Natural England into providing some meaningful financial support for our work. Under the 2021 Environment Act, the Government is legally bound to reverse the decline of water voles by 2030, which is only 5 years away, and it knows that there's only one way to achieve that - to remove American mink from our countryside, the major cause of the decline in the first place. By coincidence, it takes 5 years to eradicate mink, which means that immediate Government action is required. There's no time to lose.

A first, encouraging, step in the right direction was recently been taken by Defra Minister Baroness Hayman, who initiated the development of a Govt mink strategy after my meeting with her and WRT supporter Baroness Barbara Young in May. A draft strategy is being drawn up by the Environment Agency with commendable speed and we must hope that the other agencies in the Defra group contribute constructively with equal swiftness. Reversing the decline of the iconic water vole across England is a relatively easy, high profile win for this Government and Defra if they decide to get on with it. WRT and its partners stand ready to turn ambition into reality.

ENCOURAGING NEWS FROM ESSEX

As we have known for a long time, and the map here shows only too clearly, Essex is the last stronghold of mink in eastern England and has consequently posed a threat to the counties around it. Until we have eradicated mink from Essex, all the money and hard work invested in rendering Suffolk, Cambridgeshire, Hertfordshire and London free of mink could be in vain. This is why Essex has been a priority WRT target since its formation in 2022.

East Anglia and environs. The red area is now essentially free of mink. Blue is where mink remain but eradication is underway. Yellow areas are high priority for WRT expansion. Essex is a blue island in a sea of red!

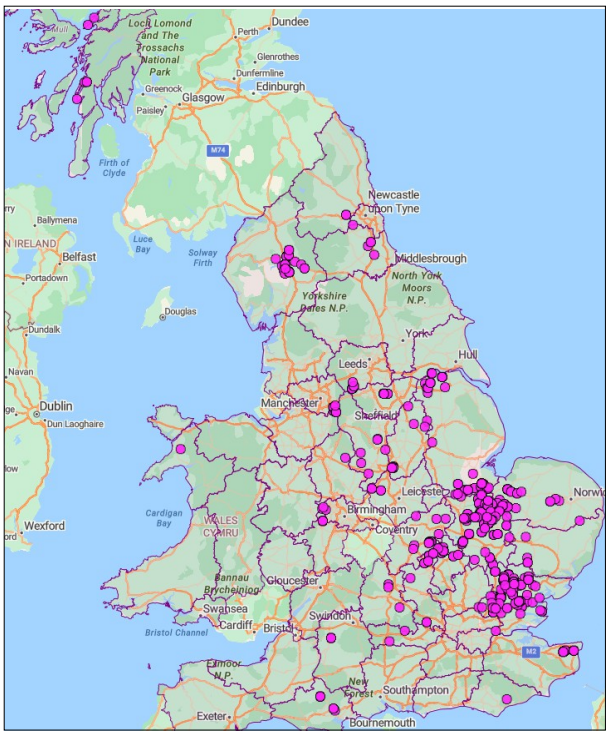
With funding from Natural England, the Highways Agency & Essex Wildlife Trust, and thanks to many volunteer trappers, WRT staff and contractors, there is now ample evidence that the Essex mink population is in rapid retreat. That evidence comes in several parts. Firstly, the sex ratio in the catch is now female-biased - a sure sign of a declining population. Males are always more commonly caught in the early stages of a trapping programme because they are inquisitive and travel widely. Secondly, the catch per unit effort - the number of mink caught per thousand trap nights - shows a 60% decline in the population over 12 months. Thirdly, with the exception of one non-reproductive female caught on the Suffolk border in late April, there have been no captures or sightings of mink in north or northwest Essex in 2025 thus far. This is a remarkable transformation, especially in light of the fact that most of the 241 Essex traps now active have only been deployed within the past 12 months. In reality, only now can we say that Essex has a smart trap network adequate to bring about eradication, but control work in past years may have reduced the population by 75% already. We will learn much by monitoring the continued decline to zero mink over the coming few years. Will the sex ratio keep falling? When will reproduction stop? Where are the remaining hotspots? Answers to these questions will be hugely informative as our work continues to expand.

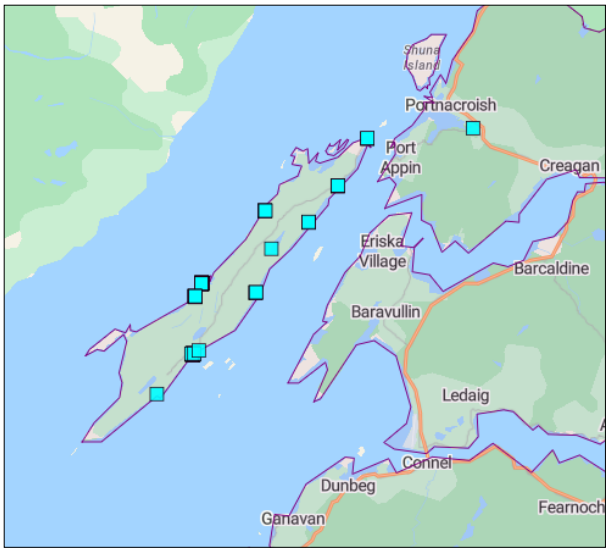
A healthy water vole caught recently in Essex, where they are bouncing back.

I remember taking shiny new smart mink rafts to two excellent river wardens near Thaxted in NW Essex just less than 4 years ago. Will Cockerell and John Hepworth subsequently caught many mink on the Chelmer in a short time, but now haven't seen one in almost a year. Where mink once roamed, Will recently told me that a large brood of tiny moorhens has appeared - very welcome confirmation that native wildlife will bounce back if given half a chance. And further proof of this has emerged from John Hodge, who farms not far from Thaxted. John recently told me that he had just released a healthy water vole from a smart trap that formerly caught only mink. Exciting times.

SOME EXCITING NEW GENETIC RESULTS

Like we humans, mink inherit part of their DNA - Mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) - only from their mother, not from both parents. This characteristic can be extremely useful in inferring the relationship between individual mink, and also in understanding how a population works. In previous newsletters we looked at some early research results produced by the Cambridge University genetics team, Prof Bill Amos and Dr Angela Trowsdale, but they have recently generated results for a much larger number of animals, and these have been fascinating.





Two very different mitochondrial DNA haplotype distributions. The upper one shows haplotype 3; occurring literally from north to south and east to west. The lower map is for haplotype 15 - so far found only on the Scottish island of Lismore and the site of a former mink farm on the nearby mainland.

Bill and Angela assign each mink to a haplotype, which can be thought of as a female surname or matriline. They have identified 20 different haplotypes so far - equating to 20 different surnames - within a sample of 2,595 animals. Some are shared by literally hundreds of mink originating from many parts of Britain (think of a Smith or Jones) while others are rare (a Bonneville or Clutterbuck, perhaps). One haplotype is shared by just two mink in our sample so far - two likely sibling juveniles caught 1km apart on the river Thames in Berkshire - but of course their mother had/has that same haplotype, as must their grandmother and any maternal uncles or aunts, so it's very likely that we will encounter some more mink with this haplotype - perhaps as we work westwards into Oxfordshire, Wiltshire, Somerset and Gloucestershire.

One unusual haplotype is of particular interest because it was found in only 44 mink, of which 43 were from the island of Lismore in western Scotland and the remaining one was from Appin on the nearby mainland, where Scotland's largest mink farm was in operation until the 1990s. It is highly likely that the Lismore mink were descended from escapees originating from Appin, and we know that at least two mink swam across the 1 km gap to the island because another haplotype (number 3) was found in two Lismore mink. Bill and Angela are currently using both their mtDNA data and information from microsatellite analyses to construct family trees of the 49 mink trapped by Roger and Gilly Dixon-Spain on Lismore since December 2023. This will hopefully tell us how many founders swam to the island and perhaps whether this movement is still happening.

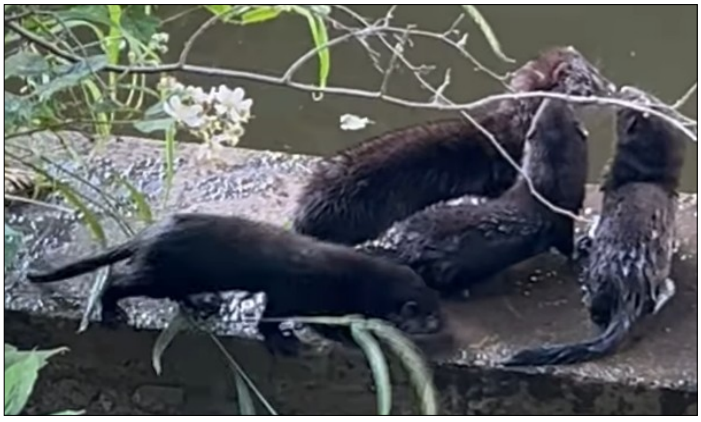
COUNTY TRAPPING ROUNDUP

By *Emily Wilkinson, WRT's Partnership Officer*

As of the 10th of July, we have 2427 active mink rafts logged on the database. These are located across 45 British counties, with the greatest number in Lincolnshire (428), followed by Essex (241) after it overtook Norfolk's 228. We have examined and sampled mink carcasses from an additional five counties, thanks to members of the public reporting and sending us dead mink, either from their own trapping or perhaps found as roadkill. Every one of these animals is a treasure-trove of information that helps us understand the wider population and bring a mink-free GB a step closer.

There are 769 American mink carcasses now recorded for 2025, so 224 have been caught since the last newsletter in April—the quietest time of year. We have already removed more mink than were caught in total in 2023 and we have not yet had the kit dispersal season (the peak in captures each year). We have already caught 7 more mink than at this point last year, so may be on course for another record. If so, the reduction in numbers from now-established counties like Lincs, Cambs and Essex are being more than replaced by counties new to the partnership. In these (including Clwyd, Shropshire, Somerset and Greater Manchester) the sex ratio of the catch is as expected; most, if not all, of the early captures are of the more adventurous males.

We are starting to receive a number of sightings reporting family groups and kits (as seen below!), indicating that the post-natal dispersal season is beginning to get underway. If you haven't already, now is the time to add more lure to your traps. Please get in touch if you need some.



Annual Mink Captures 1st Jan 2021 to 10th July 2025						
County	Year					
	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	Total
Argyll and Bute	0	0	15	59	15	**89**
Bedfordshire	16	24	107	88	13	**248**
Berkshire	0	0	3	44	1	**48**
Buckinghamshire	1	3	17	60	22	**103**
Cambridgeshire	146	56	27	18	4	**251**
Cheshire	0	0	11	13	1	**25**
Clwyd	0	0	0	0	1	**1**
Cumbria	0	2	31	80	44	**157**
Derbyshire	0	0	0	94	26	**120**
Devon	0	0	0	8	0	**8**
Dorset	0	20	6	8	0	**34**
Durham	0	1	59	14	13	**87**
Dyfed	0	0	0	3	4	**7**
East Riding of Yorkshire	0	0	1	4	1	**6**
East Sussex	0	15	18	26	32	**91**
Essex	8	18	36	169	35	**266**
Gloucestershire	0	0	0	0	1	**1**
Greater Manchester	0	0	0	30	9	**39**
Gwynedd	0	0	8	27	9	**44**
Hampshire	0	0	1	47	18	**66**
Herefordshire	0	0	0	2	0	**2**
Hertfordshire	8	5	5	7	0	**25**
Kent	0	3	46	43	80	**172**
Lancashire	0	0	0	0	1	**1**
Leicestershire	0	2	4	23	24	**53**
Lincolnshire	50	101	168	441	98	**858**
London North	0	0	2	13	1	**16**
London South	0	0	0	1	0	**1**
Norfolk	83	34	5	0	0	**122**
North Yorkshire	0	0	9	6	5	**20**
Northamptonshire	1	9	25	88	27	**150**
Northumberland	0	0	3	5	1	**9**
Nottinghamshire	1	0	7	110	99	**217**
Oxfordshire	0	0	10	21	3	**34**
Powys	0	0	0	0	3	**3**
Ross and Cromarty	0	3	2	2	0	**7**
Rutland	0	0	3	9	1	**13**
Shropshire	0	0	0	0	4	**4**
Somerset	0	0	0	1	1	**2**
South Yorkshire	29	23	22	42	18	**134**
Staffordshire	9	18	16	122	45	**210**
Suffolk	27	8	4	1	0	**40**
Surrey	0	0	1	52	62	**115**
Tyne & Wear	0	1	5	3	1	**10**
West Glamorgan	0	0	0	0	1	**1**
West Midlands	0	0	1	0	8	**9**
West Sussex	1	3	10	63	25	**102**
West Yorkshire	0	0	0	28	8	**36**
Wiltshire	0	0	0	5	4	**9**
Worcestershire	0	1	1	2	0	**4**
Total	**380**	**350**	**689**	**1882**	**769**	**4070**

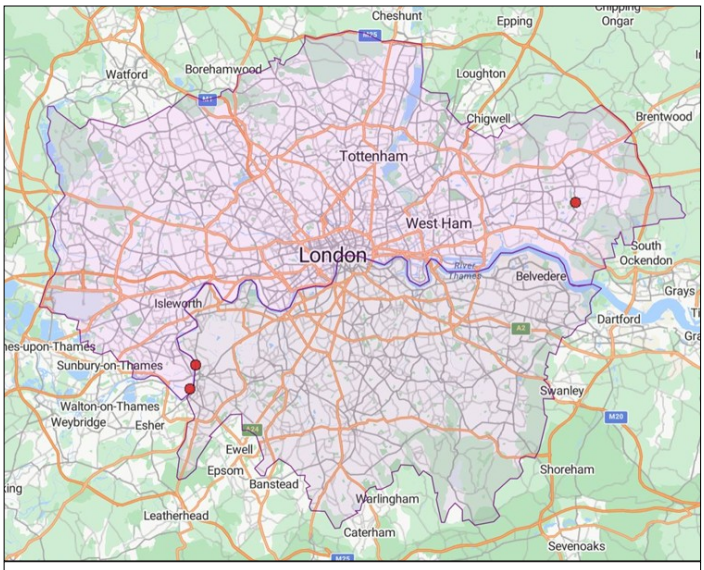
IN PRAISE OF EMPTY MINK TRAPS

By Rob Martin, WRT's Project Officer for London and Surrey

I am frequently asked by volunteers: "Why has my trap not caught any mink? Is there something wrong with it?" And if a trap has been productive in the past, the question is: "Why has my trap not caught any mink recently?" In London, which is part of my patch, many traps have never caught anything, apart from perhaps an indignant squirrel who thought he had to defend his territory from a stinky mustelid. However, it is important to remember that traps that catch nothing are equally valuable to the project as those that haul in furry customers every few weeks.

A consistently empty trap tells us that the area is clear of mink and therefore no further traps are required there. A set of consistently empty traps allows us to tick off a part of the country as probably mink-free.

The map below shows mink captures in Greater London during the last 12 months. All but three of the area's traps have been empty for the last calendar year, and there have been no captures at all in 2025. Those captures that did occur last year were very probably visitors from outside London. So all those dedicated volunteers who look after the London traps and might worry about not having caught a predator have instead effectively demonstrated that Greater London, alongside most of East Anglia, is now probably free from breeding mink. This is of national importance and such good news for Londoners desperate for the return of its water-dependent wildlife.



Mink captures in Greater London since July 2024.

Traps that are currently not catching anything also provide critical protection for native species like water voles, which would otherwise be vulnerable to any itinerant mink on the prowl from outside the area.

Finally, once an area's traps have not caught anything for a couple of years, we can begin to thin out those traps and redeploy them in new parts of the country. This is currently happening with traps in eastern Norfolk, and is the start of a 'rolling carpet' process that will eventually see all of the East Anglian traps relocated to the new front line. This makes the project much more cost effective and greatly reduces its environmental impact. All our equipment is re-usable in this way.

A peaceful London trap with no mink.

Our ultimate goal is that every trap in the country will fail to catch a mink, because there are none left to catch! All we'll find are happy water voles sunbathing on the rafts while kingfishers flash by in a blur of blue and orange. On the road to that nirvana, we will need a very dedicated and patient army of volunteers. Some of those volunteers may be constantly dealing with smelly customers and others may be looking after traps that rarely or never catch mink. These people are all equally important and greatly appreciated in the quest to see that our waterside wildlife is no longer terrorised by American mink.

AND FINALLY, as the Waterlife Recovery Trust grows and expands its geographical reach, so too must its management Board. To that end, we are delighted to welcome three new Trustees; from north to south they are Margaret (Mags) Haggerty from Lincolnshire, Nikki Thompson from Hertfordshire and Mike Bax from Kent. Mags works for the Greater Lincolnshire Nature Partnership, runs her own suite of smart mink traps and has been a knowledgeable, dedicated advocate of WRT since its formation. Nikki is a charismatic businesswoman with a passion for nature, a determination to make a difference both globally and locally, and a knowledge of nature-related philanthropy that will be of real benefit to our charity. Mike runs a land and property agency, appears to be on good terms with every landowner in southeast England and has been a valued, influential supporter of WRT since we first dared to cast our eyes south of the Thames a few years ago.

As we welcome our new Trustees, we say farewell to one of our founders. David Wege has been WRT's Hon. Secretary since 2022 and has done a great job in helping this new charity grow and mature. David is handing over his duties to Trustee Alison Neil and we thank him for his time, effort and patience during WRT's formative years.

With my best wishes,

Tony Martin

Chair of the Waterlife Recovery Trust Board of Trustees

STOP PRESS: *New funding for South Yorkshire. We have just been Informed that a recent funding application to expand WRT's work into South Yorkshire has been approved. Not only will this bring huge benefits for Yorkshire's wildlife, but also means that we will prevent mink moving into adjacent Nottinghamshire and Lincolnshire, where mink eradication efforts are well underway. We look forward to continuing close collaboration with the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust and others who already operate some traps in the county. The days of American mink in South Yorkshire are numbered.*

www.waterliferecoverytrust.org.uk