



Waterlife Recovery Trust



NEWSLETTER 13

January 2026

EXCITING YEAR AHEAD FOLLOWING ONE OF GREAT SUCCESS

We are barely into the New Year, yet 2026 holds great promise for WRT and we are already working hard to turn that promise into concrete progress and achievement. More on that below, but first a quick look back at our accomplishments in 2025.

Three highlights stand out for me. The first, ironically, is a negative one: still no sign of mink in Norfolk or Suffolk. With every month that passes, confidence grows that we really have cleared this invasive predator from most of East Anglia, and later in this newsletter we'll hear great news from the last remaining mink holdout - Essex. Secondly, successful completion of our largest grant contract to date. Chaired by Simon Baker and delivered by WRT staff including manager Malc Smith,



WRT has been invited to apply for funding for two large mink eradication projects to save water voles from oblivion. The yellow region above is the larger of the two, wrapping around our existing operational area. It covers 15.5% of England.

the 'Landscape Scale Water Vole Recovery' project was signed off by Natural England, delivered extraordinary results from the Humber to the Thames and cemented WRT's reputation for reliability and sound financial management. Thirdly, range expansion. In 2025 we employed our first Project Officers in Kent, E & W Sussex, South Yorkshire and South Wales, thanks to the generosity of donors and the hard work of the entire WRT team (staff, Trustees and volunteers) in inspiring that support. At the end of the year, WRT had staff in 19 counties, and were collaborating with partner organisations in most other English counties, as well as many in Wales and Scotland.

And so to 2026. Can we do even better? Well, yes, I rather think we can. Just before Christmas WRT was invited by Natural England to submit applications to fund water vole recovery across two adjacent multi-county areas - one in the southeast (Kent, E & W Sussex, Hants, Surrey and Berkshire) and the other in central England (Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Northants,

Cambridgeshire, Beds, Warwickshire, Leicestershire, Rutland and Derbyshire). The objective will be to bring all of these counties up to the same level in terms of smart mink trap coverage by filling gaps in those areas where a start has been made and setting up a comprehensive network of trap and volunteers to manage them in areas where little or no mink trapping is currently underway.

These grants will be for 2¾ years, starting in July 2026 and finishing at the end of March 2029. They would allow WRT, working hand-in-glove with partner organisations and volunteers, to transform the conservation prospects of water voles and other iconic native wildlife across more than a quarter of England.

As exciting a prospect as these projects are, there is much work to be done before the submission deadline at the end of February, not least in costing everything down to the last raft, post, water vole excluder and hour of Financial Auditor's time. In addition, WRT will need formal agreements with several partner organisations, with whom negotiations have already started, and must be ready to hit the ground running on July 1st. Ready we will be.

Even before the prospect of large Natural England projects came along, 2026 was shaping up to be a busy year. First up, on January 5th we welcomed Victoria Warsap as our newest Project Officer. Victoria lives in Beverley and will be responsible for initiating, supporting and coordinating mink removal throughout most of the East Riding of Yorkshire, working closely with Yorkshire Water, Yorkshire Wildlife Trust, East Yorkshire Rivers Trust and volunteer trappers who have already made a good start in their local area. Although Victoria is pioneering a new region for WRT, she will be supported by experienced Project Officers in South Yorkshire and Lincolnshire and will report to our Operations Manager Malc Smith, who is already ensuring that she has all the equipment and training required. I liked Victoria as soon as I met her. On enquiring if her accent was from Yorkshire, she told me that she *has* no accent; everyone else does. Love it.



Victoria Warsap, here nobly braving a frigid East Yorkshire dawn, is WRT's first recruit of 2026. Vicky's post has been funded by Yorkshire Water and her 'patch' includes the delightful River Hull, which supplies drinking water to the city of the same name.



Also in January (in fact now, as I write this) I'm travelling to South Wales, not only to spend time in the field with Natalie Kyte, WRT's first Project Officer in the Principality, but also to create the World's first artificial eau de mink - intended as a replacement for, or at least to supplement, the memorable anal gland liquid we currently harvest from carcasses and use as scent lure in traps. Carsten Muller at Cardiff University has analysed many samples of this elixir collected by WRT, identified the main volatile compounds that create it, and will lend his nose to the task of trying to recreate the odour of mink by mixing them together in various ratios. I can't get out of my mind the thought of Carsten, Natalie and I, hooded, dressed in black and huddled over a malodorous laboratory glass beaker chanting 'hubble bubble toil and trouble'. If we spill any of this stuff onto the laboratory floor, I'm convinced the building will have to be condemned and demolished, but that would be a small price to pay for creating the world's first synthetic mink lure.

One of the odour-sampling tubes we filled with pungent eau de mink. These are normally used for 'cherry blossom in spring' or 'Norwegian pine forest'.

MY FIRST SIX MONTHS By **Alex Rumph** (Alex is a WRT Project Officer in the High Weald National Landscape, straddling the East Sussex/Kent border). His post, and that of colleague Lee Dalton, is funded by Defra's Farming in Protected Landscapes scheme.

It was during a casual job search that I stumbled upon an advertisement for a Project Officer role in the High Weald area for the Waterlife Recovery Trust. This role instantly grabbed my attention, being passionate about our native wildlife and rivers, the possibility of being part of an environmental project that I might actually be able to see through to completion within my lifetime was something I had to go for.



Alex with a new smart trap and raft, about to add to his now substantial trap network

Working as a Project Officer has been rewarding and challenging. The first five to six months have flown by and the mink captures keep increasing. In my previous role my days were often spent behind a computer or on-site visits. Here in the High Weald as a Project Officer, things are much more unpredictable and often dependent on things I can't control like the weather and the mink!

This job is all about connections and a significant part of my role is in developing these - it's amazing who knows who and this often proves to be the key to unlocking access or information and whilst the High Weald covers a large area it does present some unique hurdles. These include numerous pockets of poor signal and plenty of time has been spent trying to find a stable enough signal to enable the vital Remoti system to function properly. Another challenge is the fact that our rivers are prone to flash flooding. A mink raft that is perfectly accessible one day can, following a night of heavy rainfall, become inverted, snagged, or completely unreachable without the use of a boat.

One of the most rewarding aspects of this role has been the interaction with the local community. I have had the privilege of meeting and training countless landowners and volunteers. Their support for the work has been overwhelmingly positive and really encouraging. Their knowledge of the High Weald is invaluable, and their willingness to partner with us makes the job even more enjoyable and definitely more effective.

This role has turned out to be exactly what I hoped for: a practical, hands-on way to help protect and improve our native wildlife in the High Weald area.

My mink captures keep increasing even though statistically there should be a slowing down over this period. In fact, December saw me record the highest number of captures in a single month but even the mink were kind enough to grant me a break on Christmas Day itself!

My plan for the next few months is to keep filling those gaps and strengthening the vital partnerships with landowners and Volunteers. The first six months have given us a really solid base, but there's still loads to do to make sure our project in the High Weald area succeeds.



Every stream in the High Weald seems to harbour American mink, but Alex and Lee Dalton, whose patch extends to other parts of East and West Sussex, are making great inroads into the population. The density of mink in this corner of England is astonishing.

MINK ON THE BRINK

By **Charlotte ‘Lottie’ Lewis** (WRT’s Project Officer for Essex)

Over the past six months, Essex has delivered some of the most encouraging signs yet that mink eradication is truly within reach. Since 1 July, only 35 mink have been caught across the county—a dramatic drop compared with the 123 recorded during the same period last year. Even more striking is that this decline has occurred despite a significant increase in trapping effort, with 241 active traps now deployed across Essex compared with 163 at the start of 2025. In other words, we’re catching around 70% fewer mink even though we have nearly 80 more traps on the ground. This is exactly the pattern we hope to see in a landscape approaching eradication: more traps, fewer mink.



Lottie having just re-lured one of her traps on a wet Essex morning in January. The mink mating season is about to get underway, so every one of the 2,000+ traps in WRT’s network has to be checked and refurbished, regardless of the weather.

The distribution of recent captures (map below) tells an equally promising story. Since April 2025 no mink have been caught further north than the River Ter near Witham. Instead, the remaining individuals appear to be along the county’s major river systems—the Blackwater, Chelmer and Roding. These rivers have acted like natural funnels since the project began, consistently producing captures as mink moved through the landscape.

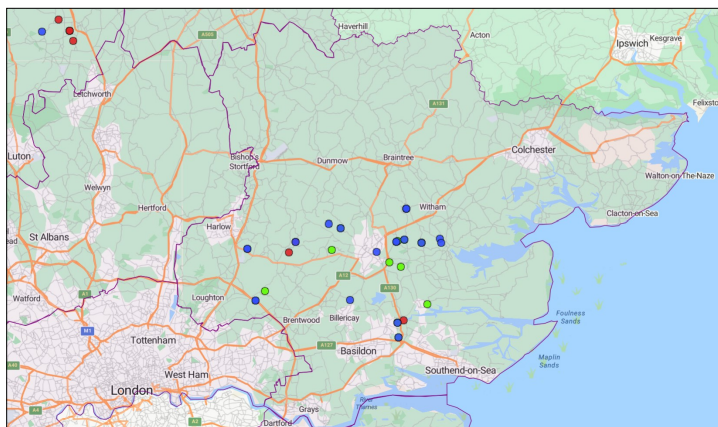
But the past year has also reminded us that every river matters, not just the big ones. Smaller watercourses such as the Ter and the Can have proven their importance. On both rivers, mink were caught astonishingly quickly after traps were first deployed - within 45 hours on the Ter and just 14 hours on the Can. These rapid detections highlight why comprehensive

coverage is essential, especially in the final stages of eradication.

Our progress in Essex is also aligning with wider ecological recovery. Recent water vole surveys along the River Colne in North Essex have reported encouraging numbers (see page 6), and it’s heartening to see these early signs of resurgence coinciding with the sharp decline in mink presence. While it’s too early to declare victory, the relationship between reduced mink pressure and water vole recovery is exactly what this project aims to achieve. Traps nearby remain active and rebaited – just in case!

Our next milestone is an ambitious but achievable one: a “kit-free” summer. When we detect no juveniles in a season, it will strongly suggest that mink are present at such low levels as to prevent breeding; a clear indicator that eradication is just around the corner.

With continued vigilance, rapid response and the dedication of volunteers, partners and staff, we hope Essex will soon join its neighbouring counties under the long-awaited banner of “mink-free”. It has been a long road, but the finish line has never looked closer.



Map of mink captures since July 1st 2025. Males green, females blue, as yet unsexed red. None in the northern half of Essex, nor in Suffolk, Herts or London. South Essex is the last mink holdout in East Anglia. But not for long.

2025 COUNTY TRAPPING ROUNDUP

By Emily Wilkinson

As 2025 ended our active trap count stood at 2,598, which is over 600 more traps in the field and on the database than when the year began. Some of these additional traps meant that six counties we previously lacked data for were added to the database. As you can see in the table, the whole network removed 2,444 mink during the year – 500 more than in 2024. If, conservatively, each of those mink would otherwise have lived for one further year and consumed an average of just 1.5 animals a day, our trapping work in 2024 saved the lives of well over a million creatures that would otherwise have become a mink meal, and that ignores what their offspring would have taken.

2025's most fruitful counties, in order, were Kent with 382, East Sussex (282) and Nottinghamshire (215). These are all in their first flush of youth in terms of comprehensive mink trapping, so the numbers are not altogether surprising, although the density of mink in southeast England is clearly remarkable. The Project Officers and volunteers in those counties have barely seen any seasonal change in the number of mink entering traps, which is unheard of. We are extremely grateful to them, and their counterparts all over the country, for continuing their trapping efforts even during the festive period.

The work of Nottinghamshire Wildlife Trust has been immense this year – they are responsible for the majority of those 215 mink. We are thrilled to see the success of other partners' work (like in Cumbria, Durham and Staffordshire) translating into mink capture totals picking up steam, as well as noting the new counties (such as those in the South of Wales) who are starting to catch and contribute their data.

Those with eagle eyes will see that Norfolk, Suffolk and South London haven't received a mention in the table this year despite their ongoing trapping effort, demonstrating the very welcome lack of any re-colonization in areas that have been cleared of mink. I look forward to seeing other counties begin to drop off the capture table in the coming year, with Hertfordshire and North London looking like they might not be far off.

As you might guess from the Table on the right, our Science Team deserves huge credit for processing a monumental number of mink last year, including harvesting and then distributing thousands of scent lures. They are still working through a massive number each week, and we ask trappers to please continue liaising with Bill (bill.mansfield@waterliferecoverytrust.org.uk) before sending any carcasses as the freezers are fit to burst!

Total mink captures in 2025	
County	Captures
Argyll and Bute	31
Bedfordshire	20
Berkshire	16
Buckinghamshire	62
Cambridgeshire	16
Cheshire	8
Clwyd	16
Cumbria	164
Derbyshire	72
Dorset	4
Durham	88
Dyfed	8
East Riding of Yorkshire	14
East Sussex	282
Essex	69
Gloucestershire	1
Greater Manchester	25
Gwent	1
Gwynedd	59
Hampshire	44
Hertfordshire	3
Kent	382
Lancashire	3
Leicestershire	54
Lincolnshire	207
London North	3
North Yorkshire	13
Northamptonshire	47
Northumberland	6
Nottinghamshire	215
Oxfordshire	19
Powys	3
Ross and Cromarty	1
Rutland	3
Shropshire	6
Somerset	1
South Glamorgan	1
South Yorkshire	67
Staffordshire	95
Surrey	140
Tyne & Wear	3
West Glamorgan	3
West Midlands	13
West Sussex	111
West Yorkshire	38
Wiltshire	7
Total	2444

NATIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE ERADICATION OF AMERICAN MINK IN ENGLAND

An important document of this name has very recently been published by Defra, setting out the Government's ambition to see mink eradicated from England. It's called a 'framework', but is a strategy in all but name. It draws heavily on WRT's experience and approach and was initiated by Defra Minister Baroness Hayman after my meeting with her in May last year. This paper, developed by the EA's excellent Joanna Heisse in consultation with Defra group colleagues, makes it clear that mink eradication is considered to be the most effective way of restoring water vole fortunes and identifies the Waterlife Recovery Trust as leader in this field. www.nonnativespecies.org/assets/National-framework-for-the-eradication-of-American-mink-in-England.pdf

AND FINALLY, I wanted to finish with a heart-warming story as reported on the BBC website a few days ago (see screenshot and [here](#)). Regular readers of WRT newsletters will know that, while Norfolk and Suffolk have been free of mink for a good while now, the southernmost county in East Anglia - Essex - has been a headache because it resolutely refused to give up its mink. But now, thanks largely to funding from the Essex Wildlife Trust, WRT's concerted trapping efforts (latterly by our P.O. Lottie Lewis, who tells her story on page 4 of this Newsletter) are demonstrably bearing fruit, not only in the sense that the bad guys are disappearing but also that the good guys (water voles in this case) are rapidly recovering as a direct consequence.

The Colne is just one catchment, of course, but the recovery of its water voles is being replicated over much of Eastern England, as demonstrated by a paper submitted for publication last year in a collaboration between WRT and Aberdeen University.

Proof that mink eradication is not only feasible and humane but rapidly allows water voles to recover has come in the nick of time; Government has a legally binding commitment to reverse the decline of this much-loved mammal across England by 2030 under the Environment Act 2021. WRT stands ready to play a leading role in making that happen, and will take great strides in that direction if the funding applications to Natural England discussed earlier in this Newsletter are successful.



With my best wishes,

Tony Martin

Chair of the Waterlife Recovery Trust Board of Trustees