

# Waterlife Recovery Trust



NEWSLETTER 14

April 2026

## WRT'S STORY SUMMED UP IN A SINGLE RIVER-SIDE LOCATION

I am often asked what the Waterlife Recovery Trust actually does. Such is the scale and rapid growth of the Trust's work that it's hard to provide a response that doesn't occupy a morning. But recently I've re-discovered a concise answer in the form of the story of one of my earliest-established mink traps on the River Great Ouse near the village of Stretham in Cambridgeshire. The history of this trapping site says it all, and it's one of many offering the same story. In short, we bring about the natural recovery of native waterside wildlife by rapidly and humanely eradicating invasive American mink; we turn back the clock on a century of damage caused by the legacy of fur-farming.

Back in 2019, when I started to become interested in the concept of a mink-free GB and wanted to learn about trapping, mink were seen all over my home county of Cambridgeshire so it wasn't difficult to identify promising sites for trap placement. I think it was a fisherman who told me that he often saw one near his regular spot on the Great Ouse and, with consent of local people and the Environment Agency, on December 8<sup>th</sup> I excitedly deployed a new-fangled smart trap on a raft, at a site just out of the main river flow.

Exactly 3 weeks later, mid afternoon, my phone pinged to announce that the door on this trap had closed. I jumped in the car, clambered over gates and railings to get to the site and was greeted by a big black shape in the trap - a male mink. Nine days later the door closed again and this time my friend (and subsequent WRT Trustee) David Wege attended; a female mink. David dispatched it and called me to say he was on his way to my place with the carcass. Literally minutes after his call the same trap pinged again. David cursed and returned, assuming that he had not reset the trap properly, but then called me again to say that, in the brief time he'd been away, another mink had gone into the trap and been caught. This one was a male – no doubt following the scent trail of the female.

There then followed a gap of 14 months before this trap pinged again on 21 March 2021 – this time with a female mink that had attacked the scent lure golf ball,



*Before (above) and after (below). Within 16 months a stretch of the Great Ouse in Cambridgeshire was freed of American mink and a year later water voles had reclaimed their ancestral home through natural recolonisation.*



presumably furious at the prospect of another mink in her territory. We weren't to know it at the time, but this fourth mink was to be the last. The trap activated again on May 6<sup>th</sup> 2022 and I rushed over to find not the expected mink but a very sweet water vole. Where had this cutie been hiding? On my birthday four months later another water vole, and a third in April 2023. To prevent further captures of pesky water voles we then installed a water vole excluder around the trap entrance. What a nice problem to have!

The trap has been routinely serviced and re-lured in the 3 years since, but has remained quiet – a silent sentinel. In summary, the mink at this site on Cambridgeshire's major river were

entirely removed in 16 months, to be replaced by water voles which appeared out of the ether. Today, Cambridgeshire is essentially mink free and this trap will shortly be retrieved, thoroughly cleaned and redeployed on the front line – perhaps in Sussex, Gloucestershire or Yorkshire. That is what the Waterlife Recovery Trust does, and today we're repeating this miracle of wildlife recovery across 50+ counties using over 3,200 smart mink rafts exactly the same as the one at Stretham.



*The River Great Ouse in Cambridgeshire is now a safe haven for water voles.*

## **AN INTRIGUING TALE OF A VERY LOST MINK RAFT**

Every WRT raft has a plaque on it saying what it is, the charity it belongs to and giving my mobile phone number. The idea is that someone encountering the raft can call me if they have any concerns about its purpose or let us know if they find one in a place where it shouldn't be. Last week I received a call to say that a member of the public had found a strange black thing with my phone number on it 'on the beach near Butlins at Skegness'. From the description - on a vast sandy beach with no freshwater nearby - it didn't sound like a place where we'd normally place a raft, so I asked Tom Rushforth, our Project Officer for Southeast Lincolnshire to head off to the coast and retrieve this piece of valuable kit if he could find it.



*AWOL raft retrieved by our Tom Rushforth*

Tom valiantly did so, dragging and carrying the raft almost a mile back to his vehicle. He will now clean and repair it - all it needs is a few new cable ties - before redeploying it (with a trap and RMD) in a place more likely to attract a mink. We're still trying to work out where it came from, because none of our active rafts have gone missing. With thousands of rafts now on our books, such detective work is not simple any longer. It's possible that this one was from a site on a large river, had its moorings washed away in a storm and then floated downstream and eventually out to sea. Remarkably, it still had its tethers and a mooring post attached - testament to their strength (and the good knot!). For all we know, this interesting piece of flotsam could have been bobbing around in the North Sea for a year or more; the manufacturers (Filcris Ltd) should take pride in the ruggedness of their product!

## EXPANDING WRT'S REALM INTO YORKSHIRE

By **Louis Bentley** (*Louis is our Project Officer for South Yorkshire. His recruitment preceded that of Victoria Warsap, who now looks after the East Riding of Yorkshire for us, by a few months*). Both roles are supported by Yorkshire Water.

Growing up in the beautiful countryside of South Yorkshire it would be difficult to not develop an interest in the natural world. I always promised my younger self that if I were to devote my time to something, it would be a role of lasting impact where the results of my efforts could be seen firsthand. My job with the Waterlife Recovery Trust perfectly fits that ambition.

Having helped my father out with his own voluntary work for other adjacent projects, this role seemed like the next logical step in furthering my passion for British ecosystems.

Being able to explore the places I spent time in as a child and using my skills to protect those native species I hold so dear is something I can only be thankful for. Being the first WRT project officer to take on Yorkshire I knew my job would not be easy, but I was certainly up for the task.

As a local, I already had a substantial list of people willing to help. This network would grow through word of mouth as I came to learn that everybody knows each other in South Yorkshire. The county is full of friendly faces and conservation-minded organisations willing to go the extra mile to assist.

Since starting this role in September of 2025 my network of mink rafts has grown substantially, with around 110 units across the county being tended by me and my network of responders. Our coverage of South Yorkshire continues to grow apace. With this greater trapping effort came a large increase in mink captures all across the county. From the main rivers like the Don and Torne to the small streams in the peak district, nowhere is now safe for mink.



*Re-luring traps needs to be done monthly during the mink mating season Jan-March*



*Deploying a new raft on one of South Yorkshire's main rivers. Louis' local knowledge has been put to good use.*

Like any project relying on nature, things don't always go to plan. While the topography of the Peak District makes for some incredible scenery it can quickly become a hindrance when relying on devices that require a good mobile phone signal to work properly, but it is difficult to complain when you are exploring such a unique landscape. South Yorkshire is also an urban county in parts, with bustling cities like Sheffield and Doncaster making discreet trapping almost impossible. However, with local knowledge of the area and devoted responders you would be surprised at some of the hidden gems you can find within the city able to perfectly hide a mink raft and avoid any risk of interference.

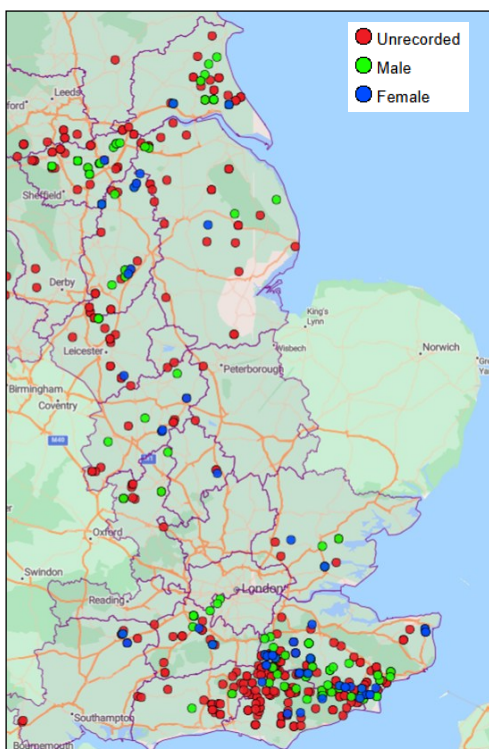
While great progress has been made, these are early days and my work is really only just starting. Filling the geographical gaps in my trapping network and expanding my network of volunteers will be vital in ensuring that WRT's operation in South Yorkshire is a success, contributing to the ultimate goal of a mink-free Yorkshire.

## COUNTY TRAPPING ROUNDUP

By Emily Wilkinson

On April 9<sup>th</sup> 2026 the WRT database held details for 3288 active mink traps across Britain and 816 mink that those traps had removed from our countryside this year. Those mink were from 42 counties, including six Welsh and three Scottish. The data in the Table (right) are from 54 counties that have reported captures from 2024 onwards, of which 12 are yet to catch this year (among them the now mink free Norfolk and Suffolk).

Unsurprisingly, our front runners so far are Kent with 176 already, and East Sussex, which recently yielded its hundredth mink of 2026. The density of mink in this area of the country is astounding. To illustrate the point, the map below shows mink captures known to us since Jan 1st. Note the cluster of captures in the southeast - the result of fine work by our P.O.s Alex and Lee plus volunteers, among them the indefatigable Mark Gilchrist. Up north, the map also shows that our newest



operational counties (South Yorkshire and the East Riding) have been productive in the early months of their respective campaigns, thanks to the work of Project Officers Louis and Victoria and *their* bands of volunteers. There is growing evidence that mink are at high density across all of Yorkshire, which is why WRT is keen to expand its work northwards as rapidly as possible (see P. 6 of this newsletter).

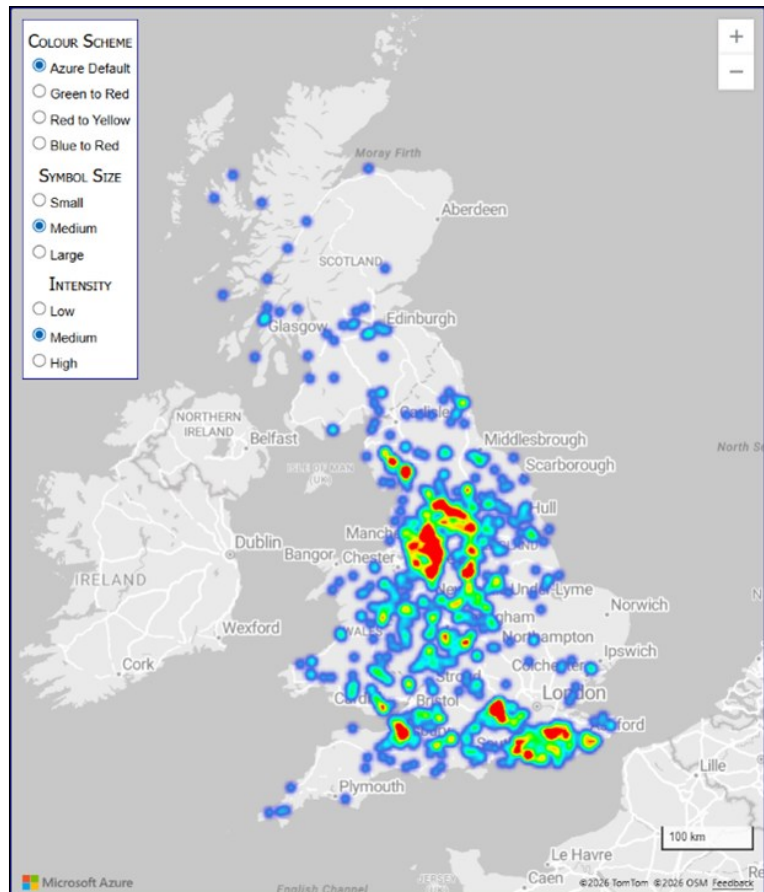
As I write (mid-April) the capture rate across the country is slowing as the mating season draws to a close, hopefully giving our science team of Bill Mansfield & Emily Coleman the chance to catch up on carcass examination and analysis. Those with mink in a freezer should please contact Bill ([bill.mansfield@waterliferecoverytrust.org.uk](mailto:bill.mansfield@waterliferecoverytrust.org.uk)) before sending them in. The relative quiet of summer will offer the opportunity to review trap coverage and fill gaps before the craziness of the kit dispersal period is upon us in July and August.

Annual mink captures 1st Jan 2024 to 9th April 2026				
County	Year			
	2024	2025	2026	Total
Argyll and Bute	59	31	13	<b>103</b>
Bedfordshire	87	20	5	<b>112</b>
Berkshire	48	16	1	<b>65</b>
Buckinghamshire	60	62	13	<b>135</b>
Cambridgeshire	18	16	1	<b>35</b>
Cheshire	13	8	3	<b>24</b>
Clwyd	0	16	1	<b>17</b>
Cumbria	85	179	61	<b>325</b>
Derbyshire	94	75	5	<b>174</b>
Devon	8	0	0	<b>8</b>
Dorset	8	4	5	<b>17</b>
Durham	91	88	26	<b>205</b>
Dyfed	3	8	4	<b>15</b>
East Riding of Yorkshire	11	59	47	<b>117</b>
East Sussex	26	286	101	<b>413</b>
Essex	169	69	12	<b>250</b>
Gloucestershire	0	1	0	<b>1</b>
Greater Manchester	30	25	20	<b>75</b>
Gwent	0	1	2	<b>3</b>
Gwynedd	27	58	7	<b>92</b>
Hampshire	47	44	12	<b>103</b>
Herefordshire	2	0	0	<b>2</b>
Hertfordshire	7	3	1	<b>11</b>
Kent	48	383	176	<b>607</b>
Lancashire	0	3	0	<b>3</b>
Leicestershire	23	49	15	<b>87</b>
Lincolnshire	440	204	30	<b>674</b>
London North	13	3	3	<b>19</b>
London South	1	0	2	<b>3</b>
Mid Glamorgan	0	0	5	<b>5</b>
Norfolk	0	0	0	<b>0</b>
North Yorkshire	8	13	3	<b>24</b>
Northamptonshire	88	47	19	<b>154</b>
Northumberland	6	10	3	<b>19</b>
Nottinghamshire	110	216	47	<b>373</b>
Oxfordshire	21	19	0	<b>40</b>
Powys	0	4	4	<b>8</b>
Ross and Cromarty	2	1	0	<b>3</b>
Rutland	9	3	1	<b>13</b>
Shropshire	0	6	0	<b>6</b>
Somerset	1	1	5	<b>7</b>
South Glamorgan	0	1	0	<b>1</b>
South Yorkshire	46	68	59	<b>173</b>
Staffordshire	122	96	10	<b>228</b>
Suffolk	1	0	0	<b>1</b>
Surrey	52	141	24	<b>217</b>
The Stewartry of Kirkcudbr't	0	3	10	<b>13</b>
Tyne & Wear	5	3	1	<b>9</b>
West Glamorgan	0	3	11	<b>14</b>
West Midlands	0	13	0	<b>13</b>
West Sussex	63	110	31	<b>204</b>
West Yorkshire	27	39	16	<b>82</b>
Wiltshire	5	7	1	<b>13</b>
Worcestershire	2	0	0	<b>2</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>1986</b>	<b>2515</b>	<b>816</b>	<b>5317</b>

## INVALUABLE PUBLIC CONTRIBUTIONS TO WRT'S WORK

The complete removal of American mink from Britain is by far the world's largest and most challenging INNS (invasive non-native species) eradication campaign. WRT has been clear from the outset that, on grounds of cost, consent and lack of local knowledge, the operation could not be achieved without the participation of the general public. We have always greatly valued the vital role played by literally thousands of volunteer trap managers up and down the country, but in recent years the reporting of mink sightings through WRT's website has also become extremely important. These reports tell us where mink are, and, of equal importance, where they aren't.

It would be easy to dismiss public sightings as unreliable and biased, but experience has shown that they can actually be extremely informative. The potential issue of species identification is normally overcome by virtue of so many reports including a photo/video or having an excellent description. And, yes, the density of people is clearly going to impact the chances of a mink being seen, but that bias can be taken into account. The fact that 103 reports were received from Gt. Manchester in 2025 is, of course, substantially due to there being 3 million people living in the county. But there are 9 million people in Greater London, and not one of them reported a mink in that year. It would be difficult to interpret that difference as being due to anything other than Manchester having vastly more mink on its many waterways, and indeed trapping success (measured as catch-per-unit-effort; mink caught per 1,000 trap nights) confirms that. London once had mink, but trapping by WRT and partners cleared them out as a breeding species. An adventurous male still occasionally sneaks in from the west or southwest, but they cannot resist the scent lure in our traps and pay the price for their daring before anyone has a chance to spot them.



*Heat map of public reports of mink submitted to WRT in 2025. Note especially the high density of mink in Sussex/Kent and NE England. The paucity of sightings in East Anglia, where once mink were commonly seen, is of course due to the recent excellent work of WRT and our army of trap volunteers.*

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There are encouraging indications that the number of sightings submitted can be quite a sensitive reflection of mink density. Ten mink were reported from East Sussex by 13 April in 2025, yet only three sightings came in by this date in 2026. Over the past year, WRT's work has resulted in a massive 387 mink being removed from that county (volunteers, High Weald National Landscape staff and WRT Project Officers Alex and Lee take a bow) - a number that must greatly exceed recruitment to the population from births, so there are far fewer to be seen. It all makes sense.

Do, please, keep those eyes peeled and those sighting reports coming in via the WRT website.

## A NEW PATRON FOR THE WATERLIFE RECOVERY TRUST



It is with great pleasure that I welcome Professor Sir John Lawton as a Patron of the Waterlife Recovery Trust. To anyone with an interest in the field of ecology, John is a legendary figure. He is perhaps best known for leading a review of England's wildlife sites that resulted in a report entitled 'Making Space for Nature'. Today that publication serves as a blueprint for how we can, and must, preserve and restore our natural heritage. The 'Lawton report' recommends more, bigger, better and joined conservation, which neatly sums up the Waterlife Recovery Trust's approach.

It so happens that I used to indirectly work for Sir John, when he was the Chief Executive of the Natural Environment Research Council and I a research scientist at the British Antarctic Survey – one of NERC's component labs. But it was his earlier work in the North Yorkshire Moors, when he co-authored a study on the interaction between water voles and mink, that has direct relevance to the work of this charity. The Abstract of that 1990 paper states '*The overall conclusion is unavoidable. Mink pose a serious threat to the long-term survival of water vole populations, at least in the North Yorkshire Moors study area*'. That seminal paper remains current today and was arguably the first to provide sound evidence of the prime cause of the steep decline in water voles across Britain over the past half-century. The most fitting legacy for Sir John's association with WRT would be that we restore the health and secure the future of North Yorkshire's water vole population by clearing this county, England's largest, of mink over the next few years. The search for one or more visionary sponsors to support that work starts now.

**AND FINALLY**, I was delighted to welcome Leigh Marshall, Head of Reserve Management for the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust (WWT), to my place recently. Inspired by the contribution of WWT's Welney reserve to the now mink-free status of Norfolk (he was Warden there for many years), Leigh is rolling out year-round mink trapping across all of WWT's reserves around the country. Support from Natural England will pay for trapping equipment, and Leigh came over to seek advice on what to buy, starting with the everlasting, maintenance-free rafts that WRT now uses as standard (being sized up by Leigh, right). Recent evidence (see Page 2 of this Newsletter) demonstrates that these rafts can even survive being cast adrift in the North Sea, though oceanic trapping is unlikely to feature strongly in the plans of either Leigh's WWT or ourselves!



With my best wishes,

*Tony Martin*

Chair of the Waterlife Recovery Trust Board of Trustees

[www.waterliferecoverytrust.org.uk](http://www.waterliferecoverytrust.org.uk)