



Waterlife Recovery Trust



NEWSLETTER 15

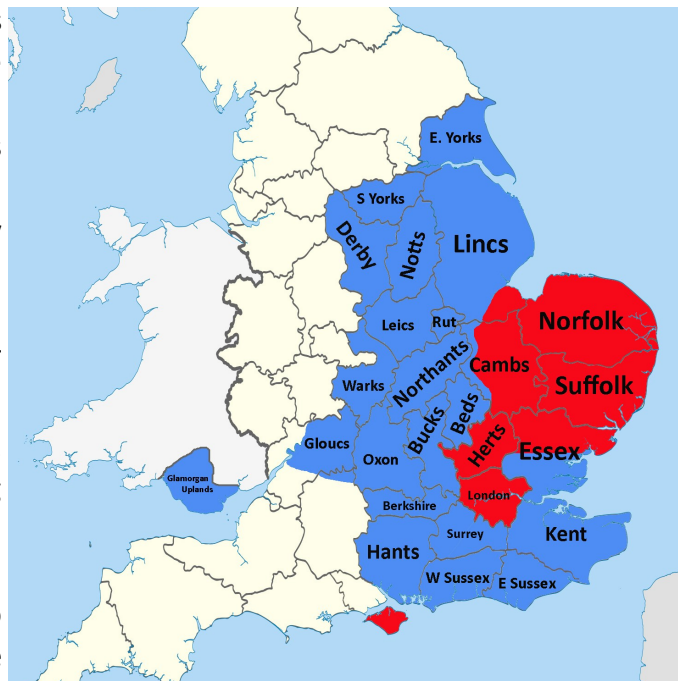
July 2026

AN EXCITING NEW ERA FOR WRT

Coinciding with World Cup fever and various international crises, a press release issued by Natural England last week about its Species Recovery Programme may not have hit many front pages, but it marked a watershed for our charity. Recognising that the recovery of one iconic mammal—the water vole—is dependent on American mink being vanquished from the English countryside, WRT has been awarded contracts to do just that across a quarter of England's landmass. They extend our coverage to a tad over half of the country (see map).

The scale of these new projects is breathtaking, but WRT was well prepared and hit the ground running when they formally started on July 1st. Well over 1,200 smart mink traps will be deployed across 17 counties covering 36,000 sq km, 9 new staff have been recruited and formal agreements established with seven partner organisations including three county Wildlife Trusts, the South Downs National Park and the High Weald National Landscape. The one worry was whether WRT's bank balance could cope with the cashflow challenge, since we have to pay and claim reimbursement from Natural England, but one of our Trustees came to the rescue with a generous donation from her family trust, so all is well.

The duration of the new grants is 2¾ years. This is sufficient time to mop up the remaining mink in counties like Lincolnshire and Nottinghamshire, where trapping has been underway for multiple years already, and to remove over 95% in counties where we are starting from scratch. By the end of the grants in 2029, water voles across 26 English counties will essentially be free of mink predation, and by that time we expect to have raised funding to lead trapping work across most of the other counties, too.



Map showing the state of play in mid-July 2026. Red areas are free of mink. Blue areas are either comprehensively trapped or on the way to being so thanks to recent grants from Natural England and the Environment Agency. Intriguingly, the Isle of Wight has not been invaded by mink, despite daily vehicle ferries.

One of the satisfying elements of winning new funding is to be able to offer rewarding employment to new recruits—both those in the early stages of their career and others seeking new challenges and horizons later in life. WRT now has over 20 staff and many contractors; their enthusiasm and dedication is infectious and bodes well for the future of our young charity, not yet 5 years of age.

WATERLIFE RECOVERY TRUST'S FIRST PUBLISHED PAPER

Within the space of six years we have been on a journey from wondering whether mink eradication could be possible to demonstrating that it is and trying to persuade others of that. Understandably, some people have been rather sceptical about these claims after decades in which mink eradication was considered to be an unachievable dream, so we needed to publish the evidence in a peer-reviewed scientific journal. Well, now we have.

The paper is entitled '*Landscape-scale eradication of American mink: a successful feasibility trial*' authored by Simon Baker and myself, and it was published in the journal *Biological Invasions**. It can be read or downloaded [here](#).

Beyond the obvious conclusion that mink eradication is indeed feasible, one of the most interesting discoveries that emerged from our data was that the sustained but patchy trapping that preceded the formal trial had removed the vast majority of mink. On a very low budget and with relatively few people involved, the Norfolk Mink Project (led by Simon) and Suffolk Wildlife Trust (with Penny Hemphill and Nick Oliver to the fore) together managed to reduce the number of mink in the trial area (see map) to a level where the remainder could be mopped up in a relatively short time by the coordinated trapping campaign set up by the Waterlife Recovery East project and completed by the then newly formed charity Waterlife Recovery Trust.



Location of the mink eradication trial. Shaded green is the 'Core Area' within which eradication was tested. Red is the 'Buffer Zone' which was trapped for the purpose of preventing immigration into the Core Area from the west. Today, both areas are free of mink.



The critically endangered hooded grebe - on the brink of extinction largely due to predation by American mink.

Proof that American mink can be eradicated on a landscape scale is of huge importance not just in the UK, but globally. The EU recently added this predator to its list of invasive alien species of Union concern, a move previously vetoed by Denmark because of its huge mink farming industry, now banned. European conservationists are desperate to rid the continent of American mink, not least because this introduced species has almost wiped out the smaller, native European mink. In southern South America the primary concern is for the critically endangered and stunningly beautiful hooded grebe, which survives only because of the activities of a group of dedicated trappers who seek to protect some of the high altitude lakes where the species breed. Today, no more than 600 of these grebes survive, and their breeding success is near zero due to mink predation. If our paper encourages or inspires the heroic work of the grebe defenders in any way, I would be delighted and humbled.

NEW FUNDING PAVES WAY FOR A MINK-FREE E/W CORRIDOR

As discussed on Page 2 of this newsletter, the Waterlife Recovery Trust began its journey in East Anglia. The removal of mink from Norfolk and Suffolk, and the rapid recovery of water voles that followed, inspired much-needed funding and opportunity for expansion of our work. The map on Page 1 shows just how far we've come in the space of a few years - pushing the front line away from East Anglia to the North, West and South.

From a strategic and financial perspective, it makes good sense to simply keep pushing outwards, but there is also a strong case for reaching the west coast as rapidly as possible, thereby cutting Britain's mink population in two. Achieving that should hasten the removal of mink in each of the enclaves.

Enter the Environment Agency and Natural England, two elements of the Defra Group. They have recently provided WRT the funding to bridge the gap between our operation in the eastern half of the Thames basin (London, Kent, Surrey, Herts, Essex and Buckinghamshire) and the Bristol Channel. The new counties to be comprehensively trapped are Oxfordshire, Berkshire and Gloucestershire, with a sliver of Wiltshire thrown in - see map below. We expect the roll-out of the trap network to be completed within 9 months and thereafter progress to be rapid. Water vole recovery is expected to commence with the 2027 breeding season and gain pace in the following few years.



Shaded yellow in this map are the counties which together will form the mink-free (and wildlife rich) corridor from one side of England to the other. South of this divide, Hampshire and E & W Sussex will be comprehensively trapped over the next 6-9 months thanks to new funding from Natural England, leaving the mink in Wiltshire, Dorset, Somerset, Devon and Cornwall as an isolated population.

A major benefit of creating this East-West mink-free corridor will be isolation of the mink population to the south of it. Starved of replenishment from the north and east, and with the ocean to the west and south, this becomes an island population, thereby vulnerable to extirpation. This process has already started, in that WRT is already making rapid progress in E & W Sussex (substantially thanks to two excellent Project Officers, many dedicated volunteers and vital funding and support from the High Weald National Landscape team) and has just begun work in Hampshire. We stand ready to push on in a southwesterly direction as soon as funding allows.

ALI'S VIEW FROM THE SOUTHEAST CORNER OF ENGLAND

By **Ali Horn**, WRT's excellent Project Officer for north and east Kent.



Living on a houseboat I am fortunate to share my days with all river life, including Bernard, our resident kingfisher. Seeing wildlife dwindling, particularly after a restless night listening to a mamma duck frantically trying but failing to keep her babies safe from a mink attack, I wondered what I could do to help. I came across the work of the WRT and contacted them to offer any assistance I could. I kept an eye on their website and when I saw a job being advertised in Kent, I applied. Although maybe not your typical 'minkbuster'... a lifelong animal lover and vegetarian since I was 5... I was hoping with my veterinary background and years working with volunteers and wildlife in South Africa it was worth a shot.

After a few months part time initially, I've been a full-time Project Officer for 7 months now. I'm currently co-ordinating approximately 180 traps and so far this year alone in Kent we've caught over 215 mink, which is an astonishing number in a county of this size. Some days I'm wading through the flat North Kent marshland and on others I'm walking along precious chalk rivers and streams. Almost every day I'm on my laptop making sure the database is up to date or scouting for new contacts and locations to make sure we don't leave any areas uncovered. I may go to bed with a plan for the next day of things I want to do but then wake up, check the system and realise the traps have other ideas of where and how I'm spending my time!

Everyday I'm supporting and being supported by an incredible group of people. From the volunteers and landowners without whose generosity none of this would be possible, to all the incredible WRT team. I feel very grateful to be working alongside you all.

The seasonal changes have brought new challenges and learning experiences - from the endless flooding in January and February to more recently fighting my way through 6 ft nettles and brambles in thick trousers during a 38 degree heatwave to a trap that was perfectly accessible 2 months ago.

But probably my favourite was a new aspect I wasn't expecting to see so soon. As their activity levels increased in spring, some little creatures with the looks and apparent survival skills of a furry potato sent volunteers rushing to traps expecting to be catching a mink, only to encounter a delightful water vole. They are not quite so happy when said furry potato decides to re-enter the same trap approximately 20 minutes after release, as they invariably seem to do, but WRT's bespoke water vole excluders quickly fixed that 'problem'. Knowing our work will help them reclaim territories lost to mink generations ago is so rewarding and means that before long hearing that distinctive 'plop' along the riverbanks will no longer be the rarity it is today.



The north Kent marshes - part of Ali's domain. This is Elmley NNR on Sheppey.

COUNTY TRAPPING ROUNDUP

By Emily Wilkinson

Since the last issue, approximately 400 smart mink rafts have been launched, taking the total to 3642 on July 8th 2026. The breeding season quiet time is coming to an end—we have had reports of kits exploring new areas and are seeing an uptick in captures already. The denning period has meant the mink capture tally has only increased by about 300 since April, but I expect the total to have shot up by the time of my next quarterly roundup.

I am excited to report a new county has made the Table, taking the total to 55. The first mink record from the old Scottish county of Inverness-shire has been submitted to WRT- a capture near Loch Ruthven on May 29th.

Regular readers of the County Roundup may notice the colour scheme of the Table has changed. I thought it might be interesting to differentiate those counties with comprehensive trapping underway (blue) from those where the work is limited to smaller projects or not quite county-wide operations (yellow). While this distinction in trapping effort might help explain the disparity in capture numbers in some cases, it is important to note that counties with comprehensive trapping underway are not all equal.

Counties like Herts and Cambs, for example, have had a complete network in place for years and are well on their way to being, if they are not already, mink-free. They catch few, if any, mink. Others have only been trapped in earnest for the last year or so (e.g. East Sussex, South Yorks) so their capture numbers are high. Others still (like Gloucs) have just secured funding and Project Officers are only beginning to roll out equipment, meaning their capture numbers haven't had a chance to take off yet. But they soon will! The extent of the trap network of course has an effect on capture numbers, but time since trapping began is equally important.

Now is a great time to empty freezers, before the late summer rush is upon us. Please contact Bill (bill.mansfield@waterliferecoverytrust.org.uk) to find out when he'd be happy to receive your mink and of course ensure they are all registered on the database, fully labelled and properly packed before sending. WRT is increasingly using insulated polystyrene boxes for mink transportation; if you have a batch of carcasses, Bill may be able to send you one.

Annual mink captures 1st Jan 24 to 8th July 26				
County	2024	2025	2026	Total
Argyll and Bute	59	31	16	106
Bedfordshire	87	20	5	112
Berkshire	48	36	19	103
Buckinghamshire	60	62	15	137
Cambridgeshire	18	16	2	36
Cheshire	13	8	3	24
Clwyd	0	16	7	23
Cumbria	89	179	97	365
Derbyshire	94	77	17	188
Devon	8	0	0	8
Dorset	8	4	8	20
Durham	91	88	31	210
Dyfed	3	8	7	18
East Riding of Yorkshire	11	59	94	164
East Sussex	26	287	147	460
Essex	169	69	15	253
Gloucestershire	0	1	0	1
Greater Manchester	30	25	22	77
Gwent	0	1	4	5
Gwynedd	27	61	20	108
Hampshire	47	45	16	108
Herefordshire	2	0	0	2
Hertfordshire	7	3	1	11
Inverness	0	0	1	1
Kent	48	386	213	647
Lancashire	0	3	1	4
Leicestershire	23	54	27	104
Lincolnshire	440	204	32	676
London	14	3	6	23
Mid Glamorgan	0	0	5	5
Norfolk	0	0	0	0
North Yorkshire	8	14	6	28
Northamptonshire	88	47	20	155
Northumberland	6	10	5	21
Nottinghamshire	110	216	55	381
Oxfordshire	21	27	24	72
Powys	0	4	8	12
Ross and Cromarty	2	1	0	3
Rutland	9	3	1	13
Shropshire	0	6	0	6
Somerset	1	1	7	9
South Glamorgan	0	1	1	2
South Yorkshire	46	68	68	182
Staffordshire	122	96	13	231
Suffolk	1	0	0	1
Surrey	52	143	30	225
The Stewartry of Kirkcudbr't	0	3	12	15
Tyne & Wear	5	3	1	9
West Glamorgan	0	3	14	17
West Midlands	0	13	0	13
West Sussex	63	107	44	214
West Yorkshire	27	39	17	83
Wiltshire	5	7	4	16
Worcestershire	2	0	0	2
Total	1990	2558	1161	5709

A GATHERING OF THE WRT CLAN

WRT operates with no headquarters, no receptionist, no meeting rooms. Such is the dispersed nature of the charity's work, with staff and contractors spread thinly across a vast expanse of Britain, that it would make little sense to establish and maintain an office building. Everyone works from their home offices, meeting online and occasionally face-to-face in pairs or small groups. This means that WRT has remarkably low overheads, but we're increasingly realising that the lack of daily interaction with colleagues can be isolating. Zoom, Teams and WhatsApp have revolutionised remote working, but have their limits.

In an effort to mitigate this problem, the entire WRT workforce and all but two Trustees gathered at my house in the Fens in early June to properly meet, chat, eat, drink and enjoy each other's company. Bill Mansfield gave a show-and-tell about his mink examination and analysis work, Malc talked about trapping equipment, and I took the opportunity to review our progress over the past year and look at the exciting prospects ahead for WRT. It was a memorable day, with 30+ attendees, made all the more so by those who had



Some of the WRT family at the gathering in June. My garage became a WRT meeting room for the day.

travelled from afar - especially Trustee Alison Neil from Dundee and new recruit Dafydd Williams from South Wales. I was taken aback by the proof of how rapidly WRT has grown in a year and derived pleasure from the sheer level of noise - the animated conversations, the laughter, the nerdy discussions about trap designs, what types of scent lure work best and so on. We will do this again.

AND FINALLY, after a lull in mink activity of a few months in late spring and early summer, July has brought the first anguished calls for help from people who have discovered malodorous youngsters,



often emitting ear-piercing screams, in their homes or outbuildings. This is the month when the earliest broods of mink are evicted from their mothers' territories and start exploring - often to the displeasure of humans and other creatures - including mother mallards and moorhens trying to protect their broods. Many reports come with photos, including this one from a homeowner greatly relieved that the animal was outside, not inside!

People living in counties with few, if any, mink remaining still contact us, but, in contrast they report the joys of seeing water voles, ducklings and cygnets for the first time in years. That, we must always remember, is what the Waterlife Recovery Trust is all about.

With my best wishes,

Tony Martin

Chair of the Waterlife Recovery Trust Board of Trustees

www.waterliferecoverytrust.org.uk