



# Waterlife Recovery Trust



NEWSLETTER 16

October 2026

## IT'S OFFICIAL - WATER VOLE RECOVERY FOLLOWS MINK REMOVAL

Those of us closely involved with WRT's work over the past few years have seen with our own eyes how water voles often appear, as if by magic, once mink have been removed from an area. Understandably, even copious anecdotal evidence may not be enough to convince everyone; what we needed was published, scientific proof. Well, now we have it, in the form of a study published this month in the journal *Animal Conservation*\*.

Using data from WRT's eradication trial in Norfolk and Suffolk, Albert Bonet Bigata of the University of Aberdeen investigated the response of water voles (as shown by trap captures) to the removal of mink and showed that the two were closely linked. The longer the mink trapping operation had been underway, the greater the probability of encountering water voles. The study also showed that our data probably under-represented the rate of water vole recovery; the scent lure we use to attract mink actively dissuades voles from entering traps. They may well be close to a trap, but aren't dumb enough to explore further if they suspect that a mink may be lurking within!

The publication of this formal study of our trapping work in Norfolk and Suffolk coincides with some excellent recent news from neighbouring Cambridgeshire. Surveys by the Countryside Regeneration Trust demonstrated the catastrophic loss of water voles to mink and then, after this predator was removed, their astonishing recovery to pre-mink status. CRT will be publishing these heart-warming results later in 2026.

It is rare for the impact of invasive predator removal on the abundance and range of a prey species to be studied, let alone analysed and published. Information about the response of other likely or known mink prey such as kingfishers, moorhens, grebes, ducks and sand martins is simply not available, but we can surely be confident that they, too, benefit greatly.



Graham Catley

*Water voles thrive in the absence of American mink. This one was photographed by Graham Catley - trapping volunteer (and undergraduate friend of the WRT Chair!) - at Alkborough Flats, north Lincolnshire, where trapping by N. Lincs Council started in 2022 under WRT guidance (see page 3).*

\*Invasive Predator Eradication Programme Yields Recovery of an Endangered Native Mammal. Bonet Bigata, Martin, Baker and Lambin. *Animal Conservation*: 2026.

## Analytics : The power of data unleashed!

By **Rob Martin**, WRT's newly appointed Analytics Officer

WRT is a science-based organisation. We collect and store an impressive amount of data; everything from the sex, weight and age of the mink we catch to the number of days since someone last gave a particular trap a fresh dollop of lure. We also make good use of all sorts of external data.

But what is the point of collecting all this information, apart from giving us the ability to bore the pants off any poor soul unfortunate enough to get stuck next to us at a dinner party?

The answer is analytics.

Put simply, analytics means taking all that lovely raw data and using it to make better decisions. In our case, decisions about how best to get rid of the furry critters that we humans so carelessly introduced to Britain's waterways, much to the dismay of our native wildlife.

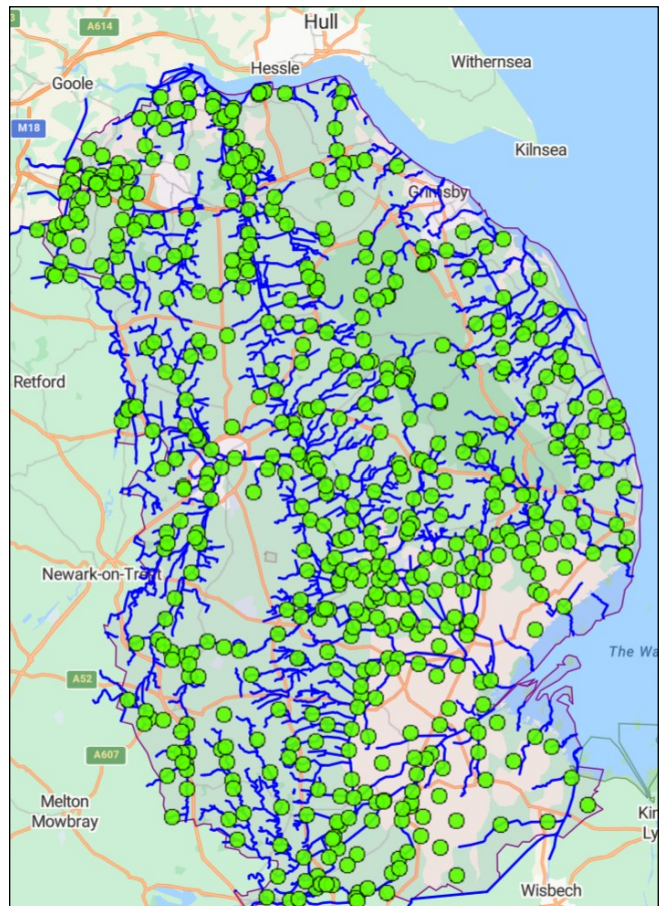
As an example, a question we're often asked is: "How close together do mink traps need to be?"

Initially, we worked on the basis that one trap every 25 km<sup>2</sup> could achieve nationwide eradication. After all, that trap density had worked successfully in East Anglia over a five-year period. Five years seemed a reasonable benchmark.

However, as our mountain of data has grown, so has our understanding. Analysis suggests that increasing trap density can reduce the time needed to eradicate mink to four years or even less. That's excellent news:

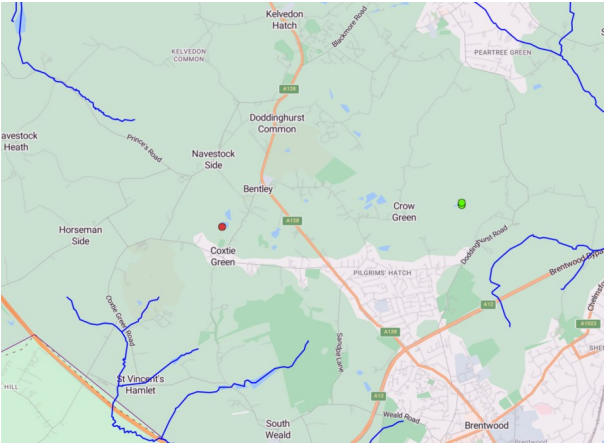
- **Better for wildlife:** the sooner we remove mink, the sooner our native species can begin to recover.
- **Better for the project:** traps can be packed up from cleared areas and redeployed to places still harbouring mink.
- **Better for the budget:** intensive trapping for three or four years can be considerably cheaper than keeping everything running for five. Who knew that more traps could actually mean less expense?

WRT constantly uses data and analytics to adapt the way that we operate. From improving trap designs and training Project Officers and volunteers, to deciding where traps should go, the evidence helps us make smarter choices.



*Waterways in Lincolnshire. Knowing exactly where these are, and where to place our traps (green dots) to maximum advantage, is proving to be a huge benefit for our work, ultimately hastening wildlife recovery and reducing the cost of a mink-free GB.*

In recent months we have been looking at English counties, such as Lincolnshire and Essex, where mink eradication is approaching the finish line. By using detailed maps of water courses, satellite imagery, counts and locations of mink captures, public reported mink sightings and existing trap locations, we have asked the key question; “Where might mink still be hiding and breeding in this county?”. This detective work has led us to install new traps in previously overlooked locations. On



*Not all mink are on waterways! The coloured dots on this map show mink captures in an area of South Essex. They were found on isolated lakes, often attracted by fish stocks and/or nests of waterside birds like moorhens and kingfishers.*

more than one occasion, those traps have promptly caught a mink!

Removing 99% of Britain's mink might sound like a great achievement, but for our project, it would ultimately be a failure. The remaining animals would breed, spread and gradually repopulate areas that our volunteers have worked so hard to clear.

Getting to 100% is therefore essential. That's where analytics comes in: helping us find those last elusive individuals, identify the places we've overlooked and make sure our efforts are directed where they'll make the biggest difference.

Only by combining hard work on the ground with brains behind the data can we hope to finish the job. Then, we can put our spreadsheets away and

settle down beside the fire, content in the knowledge that Britain's water voles, kingfishers and other native wildlife are living without the threat from these unwelcome, invasive predators.

## A VIEW FROM NORTHWEST LINCOLNSHIRE

**By Alex Cawley** (Local Nature Reserve Officer, North Lincolnshire Council)

*Alex and his small team were pioneer mink trappers in their patch (Alkborough area, south bank of the Humber) and have stuck with it as we now approach the achievement of a mink-free Lincs. This is an excellent example of how local government can have a positive environmental impact.*

Having worked in conservation with North Lincolnshire Council since 2012, I was aware of the environmental devastation caused by the non-native invasive American mink on our native wildlife. There had been occasional glimpses of mink at Alkborough, but I initially thought it was locally a relatively minor issue. The following three years would prove me wrong.

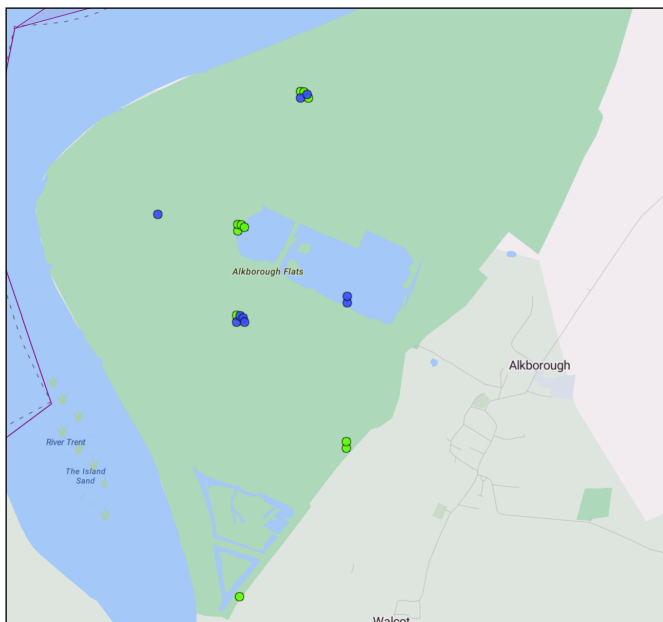
After a series of meetings with Tony and Margaret Haggerty (Greater Lincolnshire Nature Partnership) explaining the mission and methodology I quickly realised that I could be part of a



*A mink-free GB will largely be achieved thanks to the dedicated hard work of volunteer trap managers like these good folk from North Lincs, each seeking to make their own patch a safer place for wildlife.*

much larger effort to positively impact the conservation of our small mammals and ground nesting birds.

Following a training day in December 2022 at Alkborough, my volunteers and I began deploying five traps around site. I then waited with a degree of excitement for my mobile phone to alert me to the first trap triggering. And waited... and waited... until I began to wonder if we were already mink free and the few sightings had been mistaken identity or animals passing through. Then one morning in March I awoke to a message. Trap 102104 had activated in the early hours. I went to the trap and



*Map of Alex's patch, the Alkborough wetland reserve on the south bank of the River Humber. Each dot represents a mink capture - blue for female, green for male.*

peered into the raft entrance. Something dark moved within the cage and as I got closer I had my first close encounter with an American mink. Fascinating creatures but in totally the wrong place; dispatching had never worried me but I was a little nervous on this first occasion. I followed the guidance that I'd been given and the deed was done - a clean and quick route to heaven for that mink. Not a pleasant task, but I felt a degree of elation having successfully removed a deadly threat to our local wildlife which includes a population of water voles.

Two days later another trigger message – same trap, another mink. And yet another two days beyond that. I had to wait nearly a month before the next one. We trapped seven more mink in 2023, seven in 2024 and two in 2025. None so far in 2026 - an extremely encouraging trend.

Since then, apart from one weasel, the only triggers have been water voles which are useful as they show the extent of their spread across the site now mink numbers are much reduced. The weasel and water voles were released by careful manipulation of the trap gate with metal rods, thereby keeping my fingers away from sharp teeth.

Our water vole population has become quite conspicuous, even using many of the trap rafts as latrines. Ground nesting birds such as lapwing and snipe seem to have visibly increased in number too and I have absolutely no doubt that the removal of twenty mink from December 2022 to September 2025, preventing breeding and further dispersal within the Humber and Trent areas, has contributed to their increasing success. With a mink-free Lincs now on the horizon, we look forward to the day when we can pack up the traps, secure in the knowledge that the water voles are safe.



*Alkborough wetland reserve, from where twenty mink have been removed by Alex Cawley and his team, supported by North Lincolnshire Council.*

## COUNTY TRAPPING ROUNDUP

By Emily Wilkinson

Since the two Species Recovery Programme (SRP) projects began in July, WRT and its partners have begun rapidly expanding trapping in previously underfunded counties and filling gaps in existing networks. As a result, the number of active smart rafts on WRT's database has risen to 4081 as of 9th October 2026.

In the last issue, I noted that only around 300 mink carcasses had been recorded between April and early July due to the quiet denning period. I predicted the captures would rise sharply by this issue, and, well... I was right! A whopping 1147 mink captures have been added in the last three months, likely for three reasons:

First, it has been the kit dispersal season which is always the most fruitful time for trapping thanks to the rapid movement of naïve, inquisitive mink.

Second, WRT's expansion into new areas has brought previously untrapped waterways into the programme, leaving mink with fewer places to hide. This includes Warwickshire, one of the counties added through the SRP projects, where the database held no previous records and, as far as we know, no large-scale trapping had taken place in recent years. Captures are therefore likely to remain high as we work to remove established mink populations from these areas.

And finally, a push for cohesive trapping between organisations in the Northwest has led to an influx of data for the region, including captures from Merseyside—the 57th county to contribute to the table\* (right). Both recent and historical records will have contributed to the bump in catches.

\*Please note, with contributions to WRT's database now spanning so many counties, Norfolk and Suffolk have been removed from the table, having recorded no mink since 2023 and 2024, respectively. Suffolk's single 2024 capture remains included in the totals.

As always, for those of you looking to empty your freezers, please contact Bill ([bill.mansfield@waterlife-recoverytrust.org.uk](mailto:bill.mansfield@waterlife-recoverytrust.org.uk)) before sending them in.

| Annual mink captures 1st Jan 24 to 9th Oct 26 |             |             |             |             |
|-----------------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| County                                        | 2024        | 2025        | 2026        | Total       |
| Argyll and Bute                               | 59          | 31          | 21          | 111         |
| Bedfordshire                                  | 88          | 20          | 7           | 115         |
| Berkshire                                     | 47          | 36          | 65          | 148         |
| Buckinghamshire                               | 60          | 62          | 33          | 155         |
| Cambridgeshire                                | 18          | 16          | 6           | 40          |
| Cheshire                                      | 13          | 8           | 13          | 34          |
| Clwyd                                         | 0           | 16          | 9           | 25          |
| Cumbria                                       | 93          | 181         | 212         | 486         |
| Derbyshire                                    | 94          | 77          | 58          | 229         |
| Devon                                         | 8           | 0           | 0           | 8           |
| Dorset                                        | 8           | 4           | 14          | 26          |
| Durham                                        | 91          | 88          | 41          | 220         |
| Dyfed                                         | 3           | 8           | 7           | 18          |
| East Riding of Yorkshire                      | 11          | 59          | 173         | 243         |
| East Sussex                                   | 26          | 287         | 275         | 588         |
| Essex                                         | 169         | 69          | 20          | 258         |
| Gloucestershire                               | 0           | 1           | 20          | 21          |
| Greater Manchester                            | 30          | 26          | 40          | 96          |
| Gwent                                         | 0           | 1           | 6           | 7           |
| Gwynedd                                       | 27          | 61          | 26          | 114         |
| Hampshire                                     | 47          | 45          | 29          | 121         |
| Herefordshire                                 | 2           | 0           | 0           | 2           |
| Hertfordshire                                 | 7           | 3           | 1           | 11          |
| Inverness                                     | 0           | 0           | 1           | 1           |
| Kent                                          | 48          | 386         | 337         | 771         |
| Lancashire                                    | 0           | 3           | 17          | 20          |
| Leicestershire                                | 23          | 54          | 51          | 128         |
| Lincolnshire                                  | 440         | 204         | 64          | 708         |
| London                                        | 14          | 3           | 7           | 24          |
| Merseyside                                    | 0           | 0           | 2           | 2           |
| Mid Glamorgan                                 | 0           | 0           | 5           | 5           |
| North Yorkshire                               | 8           | 14          | 19          | 41          |
| Northamptonshire                              | 88          | 47          | 24          | 159         |
| Northumberland                                | 6           | 10          | 6           | 22          |
| Nottinghamshire                               | 110         | 216         | 81          | 407         |
| Oxfordshire                                   | 21          | 27          | 74          | 122         |
| Powys                                         | 0           | 4           | 16          | 20          |
| Ross and Cromarty                             | 2           | 1           | 0           | 3           |
| Rutland                                       | 9           | 3           | 2           | 14          |
| Shropshire                                    | 0           | 6           | 1           | 7           |
| Somerset                                      | 1           | 1           | 13          | 15          |
| South Glamorgan                               | 0           | 1           | 1           | 2           |
| South Yorkshire                               | 46          | 70          | 134         | 250         |
| Staffordshire                                 | 122         | 97          | 41          | 260         |
| Surrey                                        | 52          | 143         | 83          | 278         |
| The Stewartry of Kirkcudbr't                  | 0           | 3           | 12          | 15          |
| Tyne & Wear                                   | 5           | 3           | 1           | 9           |
| Warwickshire                                  | 0           | 0           | 9           | 9           |
| West Glamorgan                                | 0           | 3           | 18          | 21          |
| West Midlands                                 | 0           | 13          | 1           | 14          |
| West Sussex                                   | 63          | 107         | 127         | 297         |
| West Yorkshire                                | 27          | 41          | 35          | 103         |
| Wiltshire                                     | 8           | 10          | 32          | 50          |
| Worcestershire                                | 2           | 0           | 0           | 2           |
| <b>Total</b>                                  | <b>1997</b> | <b>2569</b> | <b>2290</b> | <b>6856</b> |

## NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL PROGRESS

The inaugural meeting of the National Mink Partnership was held in early October at Defra HQ in London, convened and chaired by Environment Agency and Natural England staff. Some thirty people attended, representing a broad range of gov't and non-gov't organisations, including water companies, the National Trust, RSPB, Canal and River Trust, GWCT and BASC. The excellent meeting followed publication in early 2026 of the National mink eradication framework, deftly led by Jo Heisse of the Environment Agency. Importantly, representatives of both the Welsh and Scottish Governments were present and reported upon progress within their nations.

I gave a presentation on the work of WRT, and in particular the methodology and strategy that led to the realisation that landscape-scale mink eradication is feasible and quickly results in water vole recovery. It was heart-warming to see the enthusiasm in the room for what is already the World's largest invasive predator eradication programme, and I was delighted to have the chance to talk with people who promised cooperation and support from their own national charities.



*West coast of Mull. Beyond the island (Ulva) lies the Treshnish archipelago, home to one of Scotland's largest seabird colonies. Treshnish is within mink swimming distance and will be at risk of having its seabirds devastated until the Mull mink can be vanquished.*

**AND FINALLY,** I've recently enjoyed reconnaissance trips to the Peak District and western Scotland, with a view to gaining a better understanding of the challenges of trapping mink in areas with hills and cliffs; my home county of Cambridgeshire has neither! The Peak District has delightful rivers, fascinating topography and a surprisingly good mobile phone signal almost everywhere (crucial for our 'smart' mink traps to operate). I came away reassured that there are no obvious barriers to our work

there. I also crossed the county border to spend a few hours with our South Yorkshire Project Officer, Louis Bentley, and took the opportunity to visit what I'm sure must be Britain's most productive mink trap on the River Dearne; it has removed an astonishing 85 mink from that river. I wonder how many native waterside mammals and birds owe their lives to that one trap.

My host on the Morvern Peninsula in west Scotland was Matt Wilson, a wildlife legend. Matt kindly introduced me to several key people on Mull, drove me around this spectacular island and found golden and white-tailed eagles as if he knew the individuals and could predict exactly where they would be, which he did! Mull, Morvern and adjacent islands will be ideal for a mink eradication trial in the most challenging of circumstances. New technology, new approaches and local knowledge will be key; success here will pave the way to a mink-free west coast and ultimately a mink-free GB.

My visit to Matt's domain was capped by watching a wild pine marten feeding on peanuts at a range of 20cm through his living room window. What a privilege.



With my best wishes,

*Tony Martin*

Chair of the Waterlife Recovery Trust Board of Trustees

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