

What's Beane Happening?

The newsletter of The River Beane Restoration Association
Issue No 36 Special Water Vole Edition Summer 2022



Water Voles have returned to The Beane!



(photo by Natasha Aidinyantz)

Water. Bob Thornton has been in charge of the project for us and has written the following article.

The Water Voles are Back!

In 2015, Tim Hill, of the Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust (HMWT) revealed that the Trust was to make water voles one of their flagship species in their next planning cycle and, unsurprisingly, the RBRA welcomed the opportunity to reintroduce this iconic species to the River Beane.

The water vole is Britain's fastest declining mammal. The main reasons for this decline, over the last 50 to 60 years, have been gradual habitat loss and the release of predatory mink from UK fur farms in the 1970's. So, two important pieces of work had to be done before voles could be reintroduced. Firstly, a detailed survey of the river corridor was needed. The data from 160 hours of work, carried out by a dozen, trained RBRA volunteers was digitized and analysed, and from those results we were able to identify the largest areas of water vole-friendly water channels. Secondly, the river had to go on "mink alert". We had to make sure that we reduced the risk of a mink attack to an absolute minimum. This was done by placing mink rafts, some of which have remote sensors, along the river to monitor their presence.

Finally, on 21st July 2022, after several years of preparation and anticipation, 138 water voles, from a water vole breeding farm in Devon, arrived in Watton-at-Stone. On the following day, Elle, from the Derek Gow Consultancy, supervised a team of RBRA volunteers, plus helpers from Woodhall Park and the Wildlife Trust, to release the voles. Half of the animals were released directly into a water channel and left to fend for themselves and establish new territories, while the remaining half were placed, in family groups or breeding pairs, in pens along the main river channel to acclimatize to their surroundings. The voles were fed daily until, at the end of the week, on the 27th of July, the pens were opened up and they were free to go.

Say hello to one of the newest residents of The Beane. Yes, it's 'Ratty' of 'Wind in the Willows' fame, but definitely not to be confused with a rat! This is a water vole.

If you are a long term reader of WBH it is possible (although not likely) you will remember that we first started talking about a possible reintroduction of water voles in issue 11 back in 2015. Fast forward 7 years and it has finally happened! That doesn't mean that nothing happened in between. The river, especially from Watton at Stone down to Hertford, is in a much better condition than it was then, benefitting from the 90% reduction in abstraction at Whitehall and extensive renovation and remodeling carried out by Affinity



Looking for suitable sites to position the holding pens for the 'soft release' families.



(photo by Natasha Aidinyantz)

Putting voles in the pens so they can get used to their surroundings and be fed for a few days before release.

Water Voles are back! (Cont.)

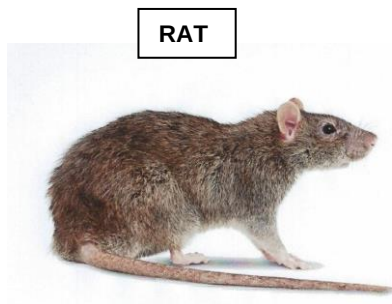
Hopefully the voles have now marked out their territories and, despite the warm weather, are settling down and finding abundant food and to do what they do best – which is to breed. As their numbers increase we expect them to spread up and down the river. If you see the voles or their signs it would be useful if you could leave a message on the RBRA website stating when and where you made your observations. Intensive surveys will be done in the autumn but casual records of sightings would also be informative. Once things settle down we hope to put any trail-cam footage up on our website: <https://www.riverbeane.org.uk/>

What is the Difference Between a Rat and a Water Vole?

Check out what water voles look like and how they compare with rats on the internet. But briefly:

- Water voles are roughly the same size as rats.
- Water voles have a shorter snout and more rounded face.
- Water voles' tails are shorter than their body and are hairy.
- Water voles' ears are less prominent.

PLEASE, if you live along the river and are trying to get rid of rats, would you please keep any poison bait boxes as far from the river as you can.



Acknowledgements:

The RBRA is grateful for the financial support from the Green Recovery Fund.

The RBRA would also like to thank the Woodhall Estate for allowing the release on their land and HMWT for masterminding the whole operation. We would also like to thank Bob Thornton, who has been the RBRA's lead on this project and who, together with his wife, Anthea, has done a huge amount of work to bring it to a successful conclusion.

For further information:

<https://www.hertswildlifetrust.org.uk/news/mammal-risk-extinction-brought-back-beane>

<https://www.hertswildlifetrust.org.uk/blog/water-vole-facts>

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-beds-bucks-herts-62352939?fbclid=IwAR2oD-RZR2LoMrzY0zfyAOeXBWpqQN8-moH5gNWWBMCHtemuxkWvkhyL1M&fs=e&s=cl>

The picture (above right) shows water vole footprints discovered on a mink raft during survey training. Mink are deadly for water voles, but luckily none have been discovered on The Beane for many years. However, the icing on the cake for our good news issue, an otter has been picked up by a trail cam on The Beane. It just gets better!

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After several days of feeding baffle boards are attached with vole sized holes so they can come and go as they wish while they establish their new territory.



Training of volunteer water vole surveyors from Josh Kalms of HMWT so that we can check how the little fellers are doing.

