



get in **VOLE**ved

The Newsletter of the BBOWT Mammal Project February 2022

2021 Water Vole Survey Results

One hundred and seventy-two kilometres of watercourse were surveyed for water voles within Berks, Bucks and Oxon in 2021 (Table 1).

Thank you to all of you who took the time to undertake surveys and to the obliging landowners.

2021 was a good year for water vole sightings, with some interesting interactions with other species captured on camera. These included photos of a water vole being mobbed by a gull along the River Windrush at Langel Common (Witney) sent in by Teresa Harvey, and an even less fortunate suspected water vole being devoured by a cattle egret at Blenheim Palace courtesy of Conor MacKenzie. The population along the middle Windrush remains stable since the last surveys (2018), however it was heartening to hear of the water vole at Blenheim as this appears to be the last fragment of the population within the River Glyme catchment, with no voles recorded on the main river in 2019.



Figure 1. A cattle egret with water vole, Queen Pool at Blenheim Palace. © Conor MacKenzie (2021)

Fishing estates along the River Kennet in West Berks proved to be excellent locations to get your water vole fix, with several sightings reported. Of the 60 sections along the main river surveyed, 51 (85%) had conclusive evidence of water voles. This is a considerable and encouraging increase on the 37/63 (59%) positive sections recorded previously in 2018.

Table 1. Summary of 2021 survey results (colour coding denotes watercourses within the same catchment)

Watercourse	Surveys		
	Positive	Negative	Total
Berkshire			
Kennet & Avon Canal	12	39	51
River Kennet and Holy Brook	51	11	62
River Lambourn	0	24	24
Buckinghamshire			
River Chess	29	9	38
Oxfordshire			
Oxford Canal	3	18	21
Frogmore Brook	8	3	11
Ginge Brook	0	24	24
Letcombe Brook	19	10	29
River Thames at Abingdon	0	3	3
Kennington Ditches	1	2	3
Shill Brook	19	10	29
Clanfield Brook	3	0	3
Limb Brook	3	0	3
Middle River Windrush	31	12	43
Total	179	165	344

Thank you to Albert Allen and Will Fiennes for reporting their water vole sightings along the Clanfield Brook (West Oxon). Follow up surveys revealed high water vole activity which was very welcome news since the population was thought to have been lost a few years ago.

The Holy Brook flowing through Linear Park in Theale near Reading was another site where we feared that the water voles had disappeared. Thanks to sighting reports by members of the public (confirmed by the discovery of a latrine by West Berkshire Council's Grounds Maintenance Officer) we now know that a small population persists.

The River Chess near Chesham remains a stronghold for water voles with c. 70% of the river occupied in both 2019 and 2021 and on the Letcombe Brook (south Oxon), water voles had colonised an extra kilometre of watercourse. Sadly, no evidence of water voles was recorded on the River Lambourn (West Berks) or the Ginge Brook (South Oxon), making it six years since the last positive surveys on either of these watercourses.

American Mink Monitoring and Control

American mink remain a major threat to our native wildlife including water voles and consequently we have been continuing to expand our mink control efforts. There are now c. 260 mink rafts and/or traps located within Berks, Bucks and Oxon for which we receive records and provide guidance and equipment. Fifty-six mink were trapped within the BBO area during the most recent trapping period (1st July 2020 – 30th June 2021) and reports of over 40 mink captures have already been received since 1st July 2021. These numbers show an increase on the 2019 – 2020 trapping period (37 mink) which coincided with the 2020 coronavirus lockdowns when trapping and monitoring was less feasible. Interestingly, the mink capture data received over the last three years reveals a peak in captures, most notably in August-October and January/February (Figure 2). The elevated capture rate during this period is likely explained by the increased movement by young mink dispersing and setting up new territories before the spring. If you are interested in helping with the mink control scheme, or you currently monitor a raft and require any new equipment then please get in touch.

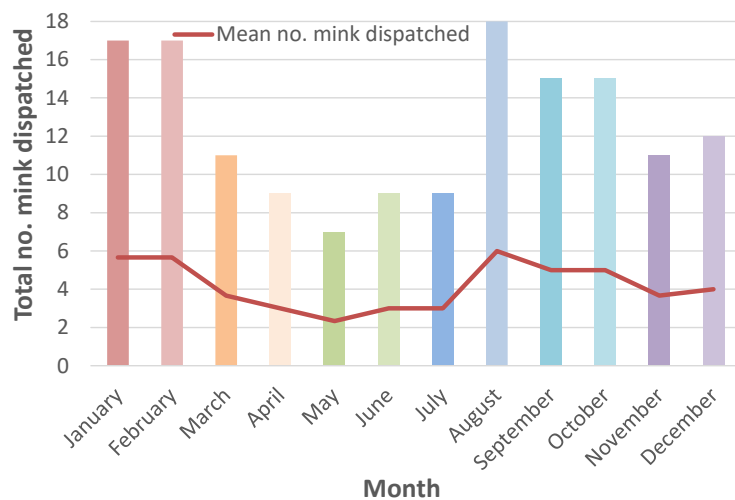


Figure 2. Total number of mink dispatched per month between 2019 – 2021. (NB some data excluded from graph due to unknown dates.)

Water Vole Survey Events

There is one training event for new surveyors and one refresher for existing surveyors scheduled for the start of this year's survey season. These events are good opportunities to learn or refresh your field skills as well as to meet other surveyors. Please let us know if you would like to attend either of the sessions and we will send joining instructions. If you are unable to make the dates below but are keen to refresh your field skills then please get in touch as it may be possible to join us or another experienced surveyor on a survey.

Saturday 2nd April 10:00 – 13:00
Survey refresher on the River Windrush. Meeting at Linear Fisheries, Standlake (West Oxon).

Sunday 10th April 09:00 – 13:00
Training session for new surveyors on the River Windrush. Meeting in Stanton Harcourt for a 'classroom session' before heading to Linear Fisheries (West Oxon) for the practical field element.

Latest Otter Research

Since 1992 the Cardiff [Otter Project](#) has been undertaking otter post-mortem analysis (largely involving road kill) for contaminant research, specifically river pollution, and in order to better understand and conserve the species. Recent research reveals that toxic "forever chemicals" used in food packaging and non-stick saucepans (known as PFASs) linked to cancer and other illnesses have been found in otters across England and Wales. You can read more in this [BBC article](#). If you find a dead otter please consider contributing towards such research by contacting our local Environment Agency biodiversity team at: FBG.Thames@environment-agency.gov.uk.

Badger Vaccination Update

2021 saw the vaccination of 42 badgers in West Berks and on some of our Oxon nature reserves. As in previous years, Chimney Meadows was the most fruitful site with the highest number of badgers vaccinated to date (18), however the trap-shy badgers of Bowdown Woods and Greenham Common remained reluctant to play ball despite the copious amounts of peanuts to try and tempt them. In addition to our pre-existing sites, we expanded our vaccination work to new reserves and private land in the Cothill area. A big thank you to Ewan Davies, Martin Digweed, Thaddeus Coward and Jed Yarnold for answering our plea for help with pre-baiting last year!

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