

# North Level District Internal Drainage Board

## Water Voles Information for Landowners

The Water Vole (*Arvicola terrestris*) was once a very common sight on waterways throughout Britain. However, since 1900, various surveys have demonstrated a national decline in the species. It has been estimated that Nationally Water Voles, have declined by a startling 55% between the years 1989-1997.

### Legal Protection for Water Voles

The Water Vole is protected under Schedule 5, Section 9 (4) of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. Under this Act, it is illegal to :

- Damage destroy or obstruct access to any structure or place which water voles use for shelter or protection.
- Disturb a water Vole whilst it is using such a place.



Photo by Terry Whittaker

This means that where water voles are present, developers and landowners who wish to maintain, alter or build on these areas must take reasonable steps to minimise damage to habitat and burrows. This usually involves a Water Vole survey or an environmental assessment of the area.



### Where do Water Voles Live?

Evidence of Water Voles can be found on rivers, ditches, dykes, streams and ponds. They prefer slow flowing water flanked by earth banks, into which they can easily tunnel and form burrows. They also have a preference for steep sided banks so that they can tunnel upward in the bank if the water level rises. Water Voles also require a large quantity of herbaceous, emergent and aquatic vegetation for cover.

### What do Water Voles eat?

They are entirely vegetarian and eat a large array of aquatic and bank side plants.

### Water Voles and North Level District Internal Drainage Board

The North Level District Internal Drainage Board are endeavouring to ensure our activities do not have a negative impact on Water Voles by;

- maintaining watercourses in such a way as to present the minimum impact on the wildlife but ensure adequate and unimpeded drainage for the agricultural, residential and industrial interests in the catchment itself,
- Undertaking water vole surveys and carrying out mitigation works on watercourses that require major works.

## Threats to Water Voles

Here are a few of the problems which may effect our Water Vole populations:

- **Degradation or Loss of Habitat**

- Ploughing right up to the water channel and spraying vegetation at the river margins will destroy Water Vole habitat. This may result in the fragmentation of habitat and the subsequent isolation of populations. Isolated populations are very prone to extinction.
- Insensitive river engineering, canalization and reinforcement works can destroy habitat.
- Increased urbanization of waterways has resulted in loss of habitat through culverting and unsympathetic reinforcement of banks.

- **Predation**

The water vole has always lived in balance with their natural predators. In recent years however, water voles have become particularly vulnerable to predation by American Mink. During the breeding season in particular, female mink hunt intensively and are small enough to enter the vole burrow, taking adults and young. In this way, entire water vole colonies have been eradicated.



- **Persecution**

The accidental killing of Water Voles during the control of pest species such as rats, rabbits or moles (e.g. Using rodenticides) may be responsible for some population extinctions.

- **Pollution**

There are many potential contaminants of waterways. However, improved regulation has taken place within the last few years, minimising pollutants such as farm waste entering our watercourses. There may still be a threat to water vole populations directly from herbicides stripping bank side vegetation or insecticides which may pose an unknown effect on the reproductive success of the species.

- **Water Level Fluctuation**

Where water levels fluctuate greatly, water voles will require steep riverbanks or unaffected backwater areas to take refuge during a flood. A lack of a refuge such as this may be the limiting factor on an otherwise ideal site. Voles will become vulnerable to terrestrial predators where ditches or streams dry up due to over-abstraction.

## Things Landowners can do to manage and protect Water Voles

- Leave buffer strips around arable land (9m+), thereby protecting bank from erosion and pollution.
- Do not put any refuse on the banks of a water course, including garden waste.
- Trap and dispatch mink humanely from land
- When considering rat control, avoid the use of poison where water voles occur and consider live capture cage traps positioned in the open rather than in dense vegetation or at the waters edge.

North Level District Internal Drainage Board, Drainage Office,  
Station Road, Thorney, Peterborough, PE6 0QE  
01733 270333