



Waterlife Recovery Trust



NEWSLETTER 5: January 2024

The word is out!

A Google search for 'mink eradication' this morning produces a blizzard of references to radio, TV, magazine and newspaper articles generated by a press release issued by WRT on January 15th. Working with our PR consultants, WRT Trustees, staff and volunteers spent several days juggling media requests, and there seems every prospect of more coverage in coming months. Word is definitely out; that eradication of invasive American mink on a landscape scale is not only feasible, but can be achieved in shorter time and less expensively than anyone might have predicted. Better still, the recovery of water voles, moorhens, reed buntings and myriad other former mink prey species is encouragingly rapid.

The publicity (with an Estimated Audience Reach (EAR) of 1 billion!) has been overwhelmingly positive. Interviewers understood what this work is about and focused on the conservation benefits. One TV reporter, familiar with the loss of water voles to mink, was clearly thrilled to learn that they're now surging back across East Anglia. A journalist on Radio 4 intriguingly asked why we don't deport the mink to America (bringing to mind the inhumane prospect of holding facilities that would inescapably involve caging mink in conditions akin to mink farms), but otherwise it was plain sailing. The public response has similarly been extremely positive, with a flurry of people volunteering to host rafts and, to the delight of our Treasurer, Bennie van der Berg, numerous donations through the WRT website.

One of the main goals of the press release was to raise public awareness of the Britain-wide mink problem and, at the same time, to reassure everyone that this is an environmental problem with a solution. I'm writing this having just met a trap volunteer of the Naturally Native Project who lives beside the River Tees outside Darlington in Northeast England, and was pleased to discover that he'd encountered the story in his daily newspaper. It was so nice to see the pride Colin had in contributing to what he now knows is a national campaign, and contribute he certainly has; his single trap has caught a remarkable 33 mink within a very few years (see below for more info). A key outcome

of the trial is that participants can now see they make a real difference. All that time and effort is worthwhile. With community engagement at scale, mink can disappear and native wildlife will rebound.



Filming for ITV's News at Ten beside a scrape in Cambridgeshire where water voles now breed, having been absent for at least 35 years. The last mink in these parts was captured two years ago.

Lismore - a small scottish island with big ambition

A few months ago, WRT received a cry for help from Lismore, a delightful island off the Scottish west coast close to Mull. Roger and Gilly Dixon-Spain were facing the loss of their organic, free-range chicken business because of persistent mink predation. The question they asked, to which I didn't have an answer, was this - would the techniques that had produced a mink-free Norfolk and Suffolk work on a long, thin island some 600 km to the northwest, with hills, serious rainfall and a rich coastline but no phone mast?

The search for an answer to this question saw me on a ferry from Oban on a crisp, clear morning in early December. Gilly and Roger were excellent hosts, kindly lending me their veteran land-rover to get around Lismore's single-tracked roads, and we quickly set about deploying 9 smart traps. There are no rivers on Lismore, very few lochans and the coast is frequently hammered by strong winds and waves, so the use of rafts was out of the question. We placed lured cage traps on the ground, covered them with a standard Filcris tunnel, and made sure the structure couldn't get blown away. Most of the sites we visited had a good mobile phone signal from one or more masts on the mainland or Mull, so setting up the RMDs was no problem. I very much enjoyed meeting a large proportion of the islanders and hearing about their encounters with mink, both at a meeting in the community hall and while out and about with Roger.

The traps caught no mink during my short visit, but were soon in action, and to date have accounted for eleven. Roger is so pleased with the success of the equipment,

and the fact that he only needs to visit a trap when a mink has been captured (no bycatch to date) that he has funded six more.



Roger Dixon-Spain with one of his smart mink traps on Lismore, the Scottish mainland behind him and Ben Nevis in the distance. This trap, at the northern tip of the island, has already accounted for two mink, and is well placed to intercept any that swim across the few km of sea here, as we know they must do. Examination and analysis of Lismore mink will be hugely informative in learning about the behaviour and ecology of this species on the west coast. Without such knowledge, their eradication would not be possible.



Breast feathers of a song thrush in a Lismore mink stomach. Most of the mink in the sample had eaten land-based, rather than marine, prey.

The Lismore mink are dispatched and frozen so promptly that their last prey item is often still clearly evident in their stomach. Small mammals predominated in the first batch of Lismore mink, but one had taken a song thrush (my thanks to WRT Trustee David Wege for the identification), and just one had evidence of marine prey. Mink are feared in the Highlands and Islands for their capacity to wipe out tern and other seabird colonies. Sadly, the damage has already been done on Lismore, but this new trap network brings hope of recovery. Small islands off the coast of neighbouring Mull do still hold nationally important numbers of ground-nesting seabirds, though, and there is growing interest in the prospect of smart mink rafts delivering a mink-free Mull in order to provide long-term protection for those colonies. Watch this space.

My first month as a WRT Project Officer

By **Elliot McDevitt** [Elliot works on the Thames to Lincolnshire project, funded by Natural England]

Moving from London to Lincoln to begin the role of Lincolnshire Project Officer for the Waterlife Recovery Trust last November presented an opportunity to be involved in something truly inspirational. Of course, I had some initial trepidation: will I be able to get enough volunteers to join, will the traps I put out be in the right place to actually catch mink, and most of all, will I be smelling like mink all the time. For the most part, the answers have all turned out to be yes, and from what I've learnt in just over a month on the job, the mission of this project to make a truly lasting impact of a mink-free GB is certainly achievable. And also, to not forget to wear gloves!

It has been a pleasure to work alongside a range of volunteers across Lincolnshire, from individual homeowners, conservation groups, estates, small businesses to county-wide farm managers. Some have been more knowledgeable on the issue that invasive mink cause to our native wildlife than others, but



Elliot and volunteer Paul Beaumont establish a raft in Lincolnshire as part of the WRT Thames to Lincoln project.

everyone has been willing to listen to our mission, the service we provide and what would be expected of them as a volunteer. After a discussion, either face-to-face or online, the majority of people I have spoken with have been keen to host a trap (or several!) in order to help us achieve our goal of eradicating mink from Lincolnshire, and have all managed them diligently. Through a combined effort, I have managed to deploy over 30 rafts spanning from the Nottinghamshire border across to the Wolds, and with more rafts going out every week by the time you read this the number will likely be closer to 40.

As with any new role, there have been a few bumps along the road, such as learning how to input caught mink correctly into the new database, managing unfortunate flooding events, as well as turning the heating on while transporting a frozen mink in the back of my car, which is a mistake I will be sure not to make again! However, with the support and wealth of knowledge from my line manager and the team, nothing has proven too difficult to overcome. Additionally, having established a great communication network with the other 4 project officers spanning down the UK towards the Thames, we are able to share experiences and tips to help each other succeed better in our roles. Despite not having an office, because of this, it can feel like we do.

So far, the traps that I have put out have already caught 20 mink ahead of the expected "peak" season in spring, proving that they are indeed in the right place. I must give special commendations to the volunteers who had to leave their turkey for a mink on Christmas Day! With a new year having just begun, I look forward to further expanding the trapping network across Lincolnshire and catching more mink, and a little sun wouldn't hurt too.

Regional news

Northern England

Durham Wildlife Trust's Stephen Brend, Manager of its Naturally Native (NN) project, kindly hosted me for a few hours in the valley of the River Tees recently, my visit coinciding with a mink capture in one of the traps Stephen had intended to show me. The NN project, a joint enterprise between the Durham, Tees



Smart raft on the River Tees, west of Darlington, County Durham. Forty metres wide at this point, the river is a very attractive habitat for mink and is probably used as a dispersal corridor; this trap has accounted for 33 mink in just a few years.

Valley and Northumberland Wildlife Trusts, has recently concluded after a productive few years, but a skeleton staff has been retained, and most traps are still active, including the one on a small stream that caught a mink on the morning of my visit. Stephen is optimistic of renewed funding which would allow the work to continue, and he aims to recruit volunteers to help expand the network and fill in geographical gaps, as will be necessary for eradication to be achieved and remnant water vole populations to recover.

Two days after seeing Stephen, I spent a really interesting few hours with Eden Rivers Trust's Dave Greaves, who has been hugely effective in recruiting and supporting trappers in his beautiful patch of

undulating land between the Lake District and Pennines. Dave took me to look at a trap in a beaver pen, and I was reminded just what remarkable water engineers beavers could be, creating superb habitat for water voles and other water-dependent creatures. This site was deep in a valley, with very poor mobile phone reception, but Dave had acted on advice from WRT's Stephen Mace and installed a big antenna in a tree, connected to the RMD (in this case a Mink Police unit) by a 10 metre cable. This did the trick, and the trap is acting as a silent sentinel, ready for action.

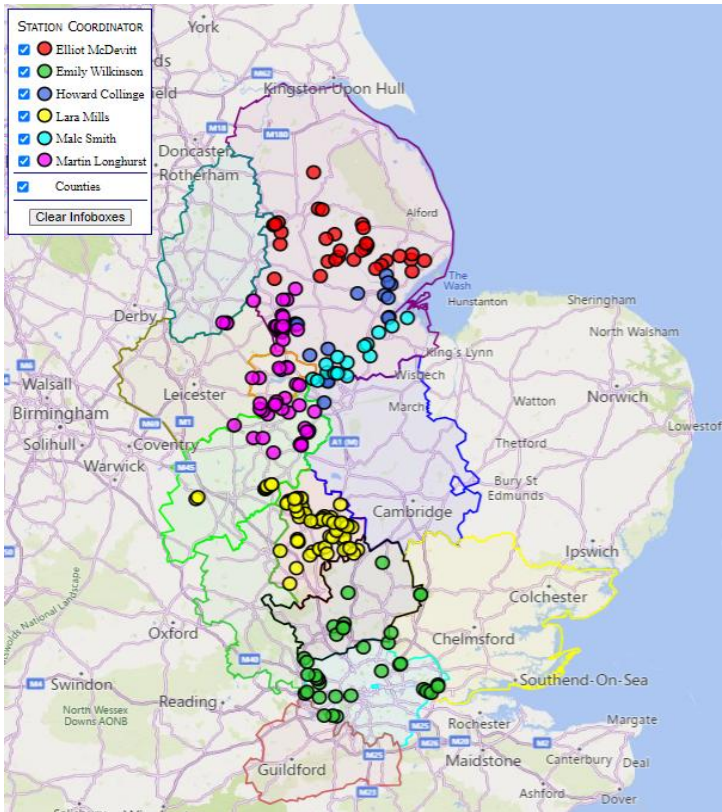
I returned home on the train with ten frozen Cumbrian mink whose DNA and other biological information will contribute to our understanding of mink in NW England. It will be especially interesting to discover whether removing mink from the Eden valley will pull them in from the Lake District, thereby reducing predation pressure on the water voles clinging to survival in the uplands.



Dave Greaves (Eden Rivers Trust) giving a volunteer's trap a routine check. The raft has poor mobile phone reception but Dave overcame this by attaching a long cable to the RMD and sticking the antenna near the top of a nearby tree (see arrow).

The Thames to Lincoln (TtL) Project

The Project Officers (POs), who started 3 months ago, are fully into their role, working flat out and the project is well on track (writes **Simon Baker**, Chair of the project Steering Committee). Unfortunately, due to family circumstances, PO Howard Collinge, working in the south of Lincolnshire, had to resign. We are

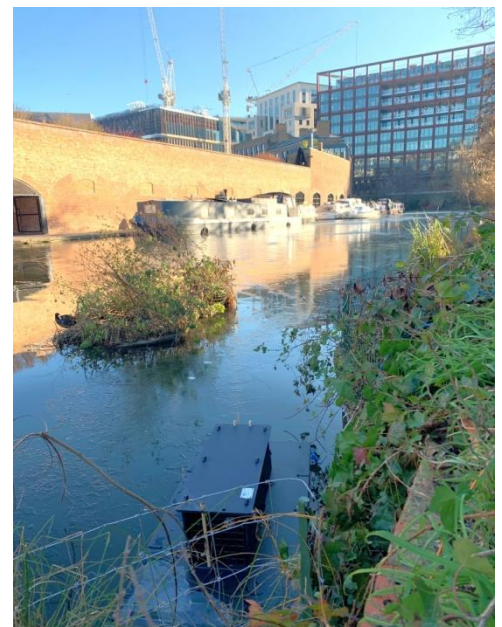


sorry to lose him but you will be pleased to know that he has already been replaced by Chris Bunce. It is now a race for the POs to get the remainder of the 381 smart rafts we can purchase for the project out in the field and scented with 'eau de mink' well before the mink mating season ends around the end of March. We had 200 in place by the New Year and aim to get the remainder deployed before the end of February.

The locations of all our active project smart rafts, two weeks into the new year, are shown on the map (left). Unfortunately our main supplier of RMDs (the smart remote monitoring devices on our traps) is out of stock and we can't get any more until, probably, mid-February. But not letting a 'small thing' like that get in the way, we will continue looking for willing volunteers and putting out rafts so that when RMDs become available all we need to do is slip a smart trap into the tunnel.

Project Officers and partners have caught 234 mink in the counties that make up the project area since the TtL Project started on the 1st of August 2023. Initially it was not easy to attribute captures to POs or Partners. For example, Vince Lea of CRT was very helpful during the first few weeks helping Lara and Martin to hit the ground running, and giving freely of his experience from many years of mink trapping. The trapping was a joint effort. It turns out that Bedfordshire and Northamptonshire, where Lara and Martin have been doing much of their work, are (or at least were!) 'alive' with mink.

The help of partners is crucial to our ability to operate effectively, especially in the very large urban areas (London!), which we are now encountering for the first time as we expand out from East Anglia. In these areas the bucolic waterways and fields give way to more obviously man-made habitats such the one in the photograph. However, if mink are present in such sites, and they are, we need to follow them. Placing rafts is not the only challenge; unsurprisingly using air weapons for dispatch also becomes a greater concern in urban areas compared to those in rural ones. Just as we are learning, those we need to work with are generally reassured when they realise that we will always deal with captured mink humanely, safely and in a way that is sensitive to the requirements of a given site.



Community groups in London are working hard to make waterways safe for water voles to return - a futile dream if mink are present. WRT's Project Officer Emily Wilkinson is providing guidance, support and equipment.

County trapping roundup

The Table below gives the total number of mink recorded in the WRT Cloud database, by county, since we were able to start trapping in earnest in January 2021, writes **Simon Baker**. This followed receiving our first significant grants, from DEFRA and Anglian Water. The data need to be treated cautiously as county totals can hide as much as they reveal. For example, totals for Norfolk, Suffolk and Cambridgeshire reflect virtually all mink taken in those counties, as trapping and recording was comprehensive. Also in Norfolk and

Counts of mink records.		Year				
		2021	2022	2023	2024	Total
County	Bedfordshire	17	24	104	5	150
	Buckinghamshire	1	2	12	0	15
	Cambridgeshire	149	56	27	3	235
	Cumbria	0	0	21	0	21
	Durham	0	0	34	0	34
	East Riding of Yorkshire	0	0	1	0	1
	East Sussex	0	15	18	1	34
	Essex	8	19	34	1	62
	Greater London	0	0	2	0	2
	Hampshire	0	0	1	0	1
	Hertfordshire	7	2	7	0	16
	Kent	0	3	41	6	50
	Leicestershire	0	0	1	1	2
	Lincolnshire	50	103	168	23	344
	Norfolk	88	35	7	0	130
	North Yorkshire	0	0	4	0	4
	Northamptonshire	1	9	25	2	37
	Northumberland	0	0	2	0	2
	Nottinghamshire	0	0	2	0	2
	Oxfordshire	0	0	1	0	1
Rutland	0	0	3	1	4	
Suffolk	26	8	5	0	39	
Surrey	0	0	1	1	2	
Tyne & Wear	0	0	1	0	1	
West Sussex	0	3	13	0	16	
Total	347	279	535	44	1205	

Table: Mink taken per county recorded on the WRT database up to 22 January 2024

Suffolk there has been a long history of pretty comprehensive trapping, albeit using mostly old style Game Conservancy Trust clay pad rafts. Counties like Lincolnshire and Northamptonshire are comprehensively trapped in part, while others, such as West Sussex and Cumbria, have a few smaller, more recent projects helpfully contributing but they are a long way from being comprehensively trapped.

Despite the caveats, the results show how quickly the project is growing; recording from 9 counties in 2021, and 25 counties in 2024. Within those where smart trapping has started more recently, trapping is expanding.

Essex

The recent publicity has generated very welcome offers of help from volunteers with waterfront access on several rivers, and we have been pleased to welcome Beth Miller as a new part-time Project Officer for the county. Beth will be busy getting smart rafts out to the new volunteers and recruiting others as rapidly as possible, because the new mink mating season is approaching. If you are in Essex and have access to a waterway, please do contact us through our website. We'll respond quickly, with the aim of rapidly getting you set up with one or more smart rafts.

South of the Thames

I collected the first batch of frozen mink from mid-Sussex on Christmas morning - the fruits of the hard work of several organisations seeking to remove them from an area where the counties of Surrey, Hampshire and West Sussex meet. Very recently, word has come through of a new initiative to establish a network of smart rafts on five chalk streams in Hampshire, largely prompted by the desire to protect and

secure the survival of remnant water vole populations. This is an exciting initiative, seeking to upgrade and expand an existing network of older rafts that have been ineffective.

The new Darent Valley Landscape Recovery Project in Kent will roll out its mink trap programme in the coming weeks, and I look forward to meeting many of the contributing farmers on a training day later this month. The River Darent is known to hold a high density of mink, and the increase in catch effort represented by these 20 new traps will transform prospects for native wildlife in this part of northern Kent. In the south of the county, the Pevensey marshes are similarly hooching with mink, and WRT will very soon be supporting local farmers there to roll out a substantial number of new smart rafts, with finance kindly provided by the Environment Agency.

With my best wishes,

Tony Martin

Chair of the Waterlife Recovery Trust Board of Trustees

