

2018 Water vole update

National Water Vole Monitoring Programme update

A warm welcome to those volunteers who took part for the first time this year and thank you for getting your sites surveyed and data entered so efficiently. And to all you wonderful volunteers who've taken part for a number of years (especially those of you who've been with us since the monitoring programme started) thank you for all the hard work and time you put in to monitoring your site/s and submitting your data, we really couldn't do this survey without you.

This year 146 sites were surveyed across the UK. This is slightly down on the number of sites surveyed last year but the geographic coverage of sites surveyed was still great, covering all corners of the UK. Of the sites surveyed, 60 were sites surveyed in the previous national surveys run by The Vincent Wildlife Trust (VWT) and 86 were sites registered with the programme (map 1, overleaf).

Fourteen of the VWT sites checked this year hadn't been monitored since the 1990s and 15 new sites were registered with the programme. 17 of the VWT sites have now been surveyed in all four years.

A very special thank you to the volunteers who monitor these sites, as this data is crucial in enabling us to find out how water voles are currently faring and to detect any future changes.

Distribution of sites

Of the 146 sites monitored, 63 had water vole field signs, five sites had just burrows present and 78 had no signs at all (map 2, overleaf). Of the 60 VWT sites surveyed, only eight had water voles detected at them, while 55 of the registered sites had water vole signs present.

Once again England had the largest number of sites surveyed (123), followed by Scotland (17), then Wales (five). While England had the most positive sites (56), Wales had the highest percentage of positive sites, with 80% of sites surveyed having water voles present. However, caution does need to be taken when interpreting this, as the number of sites surveyed in Wales was rather small. You can read about the monitoring taking place at two of the Welsh sites on page 3.

How we use the NWVMP data

Each year our data is analysed by a statistician and this analysis forms the

Water voles have a new Champion

We're pleased to let you know that Ratty has a new friend in Parliament. The Rt. Hon Hilary Benn MP, Chair of the Exiting the European Union Select Committee, has become MP Species Champion for water voles. He joins The Rt. Hon Chris Grayling MP, Secretary of State for Transport, who signed up as hedgehog species champion last year and The Rt. Hon Matt Hancock MP, Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, who recently agreed to champion hazel dormice. The role of a species champion is to learn about their adopted species, champion its cause in public and in Parliament, and work to enhance its protection in their constituencies. PTES is supporting all three MPs by briefing them about developments and alerting them to opportunities where they can help. Find out more about the Species Champion project at www.buglife.org.uk/specieschampions



basis of this update. As the NWVMP is only a few years old, we have refrained from producing a national report until we have enough data to be confident in what it is showing. We're hopeful that by the end of next year, when the programme will have been running for five years, we'll be able to produce a report. It will highlight what has happened since the last national surveys and what the data shows since the monitoring programme started, at both a national and country level.

The NWVMP dataset is shared with the National Biodiversity Network (NBN) Atlas annually (the dataset has been downloaded over 120 times in the last 12 months). It is also shared with the National Water Vole Database and Mapping Project (who recently produced a report which included our NWVMP data. A copy of this can be found at www.wildlifetrusts.org/national-water-vole-database-mapping-project. We also share the data with Local Environmental Records Centres so it can be used for decision making at a local level, as well as with other NGOs and researchers.

Plans for next year

The extended survey period will continue next year, so your surveys can start from the 15th April. The final day will be 15th June. We'll send out an email at the end of March to remind you of the dates. Ideally

Water vole detection dogs

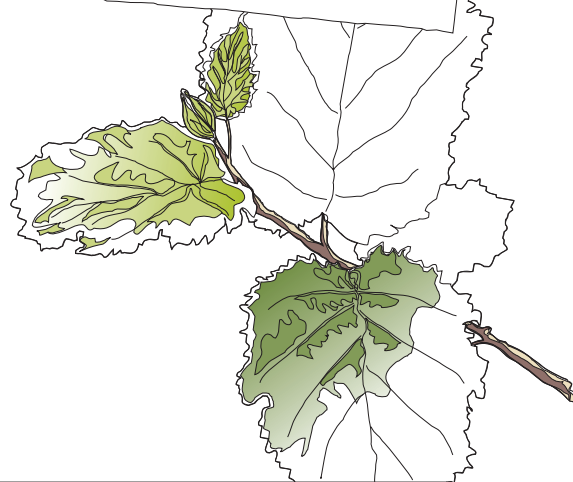
Earlier this year we met a new recruit to water vole conservation – Hettie the cocker spaniel from Conservation K9 Consultancy! She is currently being trained and we had a live demonstration of her in action. Hettie follows in the paw prints of Stig the springer spaniel (who was the first water vole detection dog) and Lola the Sproker spaniel, both from Ecology Dogs. As dogs are quick, efficient, non-biased and non-invasive, they provide a fantastic tool for detecting water voles at sites with limited access or difficult terrain.

You can find out more about the work these dogs do at www.conservationk9consultancy.com and www.ecologydogs.co.uk

we'd like to increase the number of sites surveyed next year. If your current site isn't suitable for water voles and you'd prefer to survey another site, then you're welcome to either have a look online to see if any of the other pre-selected sites near you are available or register another waterway in your area with the monitoring programme. For more information about registering a site, please visit www.ptes.org/watervoles. Please do get in touch if you have any questions at watervoles@ptes.org

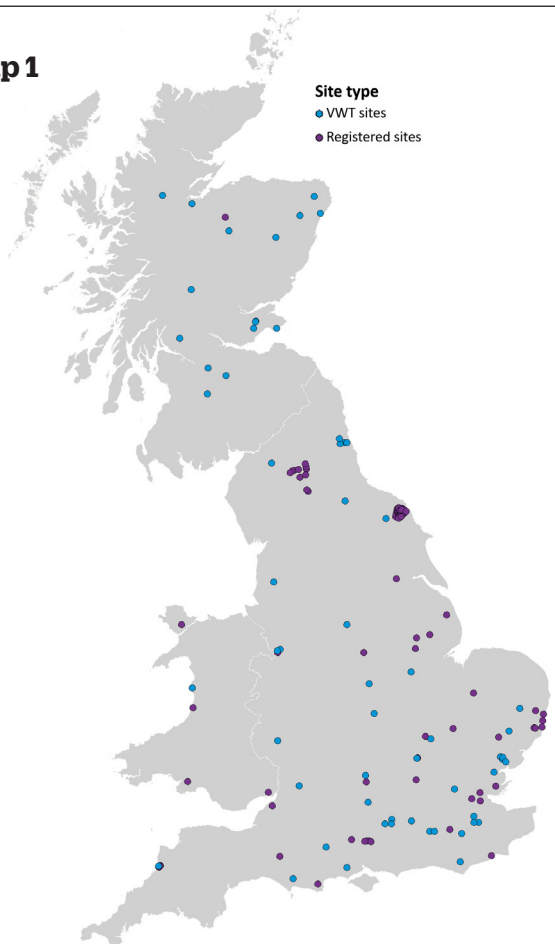


Hettie and her trainer



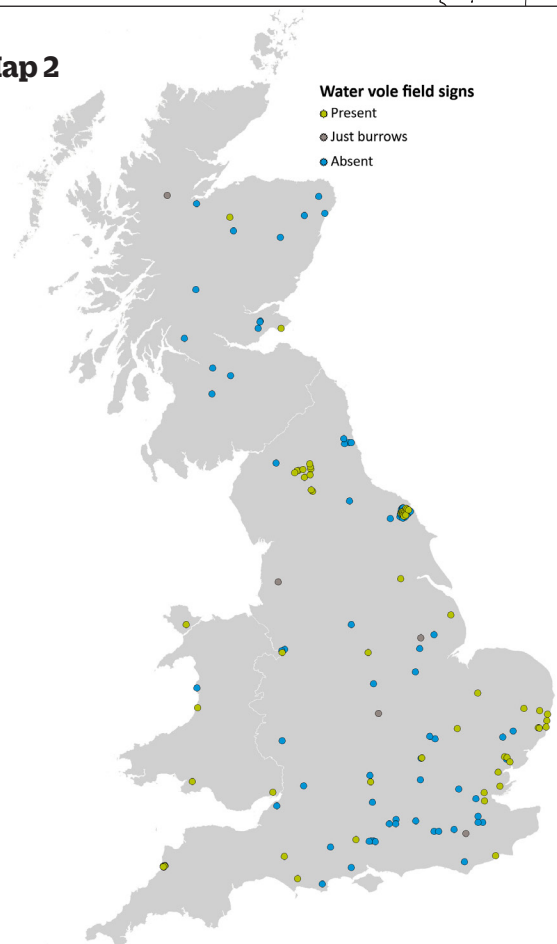
Map 1

Site type
 ● VWT sites
 ● Registered sites



Map 2

Water vole field signs
 ● Present
 ● Just burrows
 ● Absent



Tales from the riverbank

This year we've had some lovely updates from monitors around the country which we want to share with you.

Monitors at Gwent Wildlife Trust (GWT) have submitted data from their Magor Marsh Nature Reserve to the NWVMP since 2015. Lowri Watkins, GWT Water Vole Project Officer, describes a typical survey at their site.

“ In 2012, GWT reintroduced over 200 water voles to our Magor Marsh Nature Reserve on the Gwent Levels, returning them to a landscape in which they would have once flourished. We've been monitoring our population ever since, surveying ten transects twice a year. These surveys help us assess relative population numbers - how the population has fared over winter and how successful the breeding season has been. As well as taking stock of numbers, the survey results also reveal distribution and densities across the site, which help to inform our management priorities.

We plan our survey for early May, giving the water voles a head start, but not late enough that vegetation gets in our way. We use the survey to train new volunteers, allowing them hands-on experience and to contribute to an important project.

We start our day with a presentation about water vole ecology and signs, and then split into groups and head off to the first of our ditches, long sticks to hand. In small groups we move along the transect, leap-frogging each other as we search every metre or so along the bank. We won't have gone far before we find our first signs. We continue on with renewed energy; the trainees are keen to spot signs for themselves and we usually end up crowning one lucky individual our 'Chief Dropping Spotter'.

After completing all the ditches, we reassemble back at the centre for a

debrief. In the days after the survey, I'll digitise the survey forms and input the data into our GIS database, allowing us to see how the signs look spatially. Next I'll log onto the PTES website and upload the results there too. Come September we'll repeat our survey, when I hope to find even more signs and evidence of a successful breeding season and maybe even a live water vole or two!

Local ecologist Chloe Griffiths launched The Nature of our Village project in Penparcau near Aberystwyth in West Wales, in 2015. The project set out to increase how much was known about the local wildlife and here she gives an update on how the project is progressing.

“ We wanted to provide a new generation of people with the skills to recognise and record wildlife on their doorstep. Understanding nature and the threats it faces is the first step to doing something to protect it. We joined the NWVMP in 2015, and discovered we were one of only five sites in Wales with positive results, and the only one that wasn't already a National Key Site for the species. We realised then how much our monitoring mattered.

When we resurveyed in 2016 and 2017, we found signs of active latrines with trampled droppings (a good sign of breeding activity) and pieces of rushes neatly chopped off at an angle of 45 degrees (a sure sign of water vole feeding). Last year we were lucky enough to even see an animal coming out of a burrow, although it did disappear quickly when it saw us all staring at it!

This is fantastic news, as water voles have suffered a massive national decline of

PTES mammal grants update

Since 1997 we've awarded grants to 45 water vole projects, totalling £270k. Currently we have three water vole projects. We're supporting The Glasgow Water Vole Project which is investigating the ecology, spatial movements and habitat use of a very unusual population of grassland dwelling water voles, as well as their response to habitat management techniques.

We're also funding Suffolk Wildlife Trust to evaluate the effect of 15 years of mink control on water vole numbers in Suffolk, and we're part funding the National Water Vole Database and Mapping Project which is managed by The Wildlife Trusts.

around 90%. The Aberystwyth area population is one of the few that has managed to hang on. We'll continue our checking for three more years, and hope to provide plenty more data about our wonderful Welsh water voles.

Wendy from Dorset contacted us earlier this year as she was concerned about the management of her local stretch of river. After registering her site with the monitoring programme she got in touch with the local Environment Agency and was able to meet with them to discuss the management of the river. They agreed not to clear the bank three times a year but to stagger it to give time for the vegetation to recover and Wendy was asked to become their contact for this section of river. Wendy got in touch to let us know that 'they would not have listened or met with me if I hadn't been doing the vole survey!' This is fantastic news and we look forward to hearing what effect this new regime has on the resident water voles over the coming months.

If you have a story from your site, please do get in touch at watervoles@ptes.org



Volunteers in Gwent, left, and Aberystwyth, right. Thank you for all your hard work!

You can find out more about the Gwent Levels Water Vole Project at www.gwentwildlife.org/what-we-do/projects/water-vole-project

The Nature of our Village project is supported by Penparcau Community Forum, West Wales Biodiversity Information Centre and The Wildlife Trust of South and West Wales.

It's great to receive photos from your surveys, to see how varied the survey sites are and the evidence of water voles and other species living there. This year we had some fabulous photos of water vole field signs (including a cheeky chappy peeking out of his burrow) as well as some beautiful site photos and evidence of otters.



Feeding signs



Otter print



Photo credits: clockwise from top left Ashleigh Cooper, Andrew Jeffries, Helen Booth, Andrew Jeffries, Alan Ottewell.

Helping water voles

We've supported

45

water vole projects
since 1997, totalling
£720k



Rt. Hon Hilary Benn
MP appointed
'Species Champion'
in Westminster

We've been a member
of the **UK Water Vole
Steering Group** since it
started in 1997



people's
trust for
endangered
species

We launched the
**NATIONAL WATER
VOLE MONITORING
PROGRAMME** in 2015,
since then:

300

volunteers have
taken part

770

sites checked

1200

surveys completed

800km

of waterways
monitored



And finally, you may have seen on
social media that we recently
produced this lovely infographic
highlighting what we've been able
to achieve for water voles over the
last twenty years with the help of
our supporters and volunteers.

**Thank you again for taking
part in the National Water
Vole Monitoring
Programme this year and
we hope you can take part
again in 2019.**

Best wishes,

Emily.

Emily Thomas
NWVMP

Find out more about how you can help water voles at
www.ptes.org/watervoles