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Water vole - *Arvicola terrestris*

The water vole is the largest of the British voles, and is more commonly mistaken for the brown rat (*Rattus norvegicus*) than for other species of vole. The water vole is smaller than an adult brown rat and it has thick brown fur, a short blunt snout, ears almost hidden in fur and a furry tail.



kmbrc.org.uk

Water voles are easy to watch, when you know where to look for them, and their presence can be given away by a loud 'plop' as a wary water vole deliberately splashes into the water to warn other water voles of potential danger. Some water vole field signs are easy to recognise; their droppings are distinctive (5-10mm long, cigar-shaped with blunt ends and rather like guinea pig droppings) and between Spring and Autumn they are deposited in clusters called latrines, which are used to mark territory boundaries. Water vole burrows are usually 4-8cm in diameter, and are typically closer to the water than rat burrows and kingfisher nest

holes. Feeding remains are another good field sign; these are chopped lengths of vegetation left in neat piles along pathways in the bank.

Water voles typically inhabit well-vegetated banks of slow moving streams and rivers, but are also found in ditches, ponds, marshes, canals and gravel pits.

Sadly, although once a common sight along waterways in Britain, the water vole has undergone one of the most dramatic declines of any British mammal. A national survey in 1989-1990 recorded losses from 67% of former sites. Destruction of suitable bank side habitat through insensitive river engineering, agricultural intensification, vegetation control, heavy grazing and urbanisation of flood plains have reduced water vole habitat and fragmented populations. Predation from the American mink, which escaped or was released into the wild from fur farms, is considered to have played a major role in the decline of the water vole. Poisoning by rodenticides that are meant for rats and pollution of waterways have also contributed to the decline of this species. Climate change in the form of drier Summers and wetter Winters may

vole



pose an additional threat as water voles cannot easily survive in watercourses which flood and/or dry-out frequently.

The water vole receives partial protection under the Wildlife & Countryside Act, 1981; its habitat is protected, but the voles themselves are not. However, a current review of the W&C Act is considering protecting the animals themselves as well as their burrows.

The water vole is found in suitable habitat throughout England, Wales and southern and eastern Scotland.

Although the water vole is declining in Kent, this county does represent a stronghold for the species, with good populations on Romney Marsh, the Isle of Sheppey, the Stour valley and the drains and ditches of the North Kent marshes.

The Environment Agency (EA) is the lead contact point in the UK for water vole conservation and works closely with Kent's Countryside Management Projects to deliver conservation action for this species. One notable example is the work the EA carries out with the Romney Marsh Countryside Project to monitor water voles and control North American Mink on the Marsh. Additionally, the Environment Agency undertakes strategic surveys elsewhere in Kent and advises watercourse managers and developers on methods to protect known populations.

FURTHER INFORMATION:

UK Biodiversity Action Plan: www.ukbap.org.uk

Environment Agency: www.environment-agency.gov.uk

English Nature: www.english-nature.org.uk

Kent Wildlife Trust: www.kentwildlife.org.uk

Kent Biodiversity Action Plan, 2004:
www.kent.bap.org.uk

The Kent Red Data Book, available from
Kent County Council: www.kent.gov.uk/biodiversity

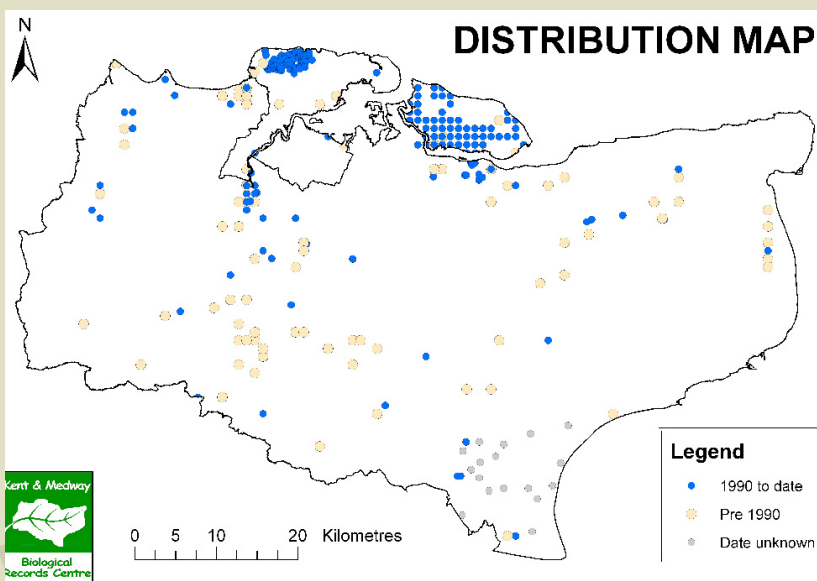
The Mammal Society: www.abdn.ac.uk/mammal/

Kent Landscape Information System:
www.kent.gov.uk/klis

Kent and Medway Biological Record Centre:
www.kmbrc.org.uk

The Wildwood Trust in Kent is undertaking captive breeding and research to benefit wild populations of water voles.

The Kent Biodiversity Action Plan outlines actions to halt the decline of the water vole and it is hoped that incentives, such as grants available from the Countryside Stewardship Scheme and monitoring and research initiatives, will improve the outlook for the endearing water vole, familiar to so many as 'Ratty' from *Wind in the Willows*.



Data courtesy of the Environment Agency



Water Vole
(*Arvicola terrestris*)