



Berkshire
Buckinghamshire
Oxfordshire



Lower River Windrush Water Vole Recovery Project Update 2016

Long-term status: *Increase*

Short-term status: *Increase*

Mink control level: *Medium*

Background

Water voles were recorded by the Water Vole Recovery Project on the lower River Windrush in 2001 and the area was designated a Local Key Area for water voles. Subsequent surveys conducted on the lower river in 2003 and 2005 however, found no evidence of water voles suggesting that the colony had become extinct. In 2005 two water vole re-introductions were carried out by the Wildlife Conservation Research Unit of Oxford University (WildCRU). The population re-introduced on the eastern branch of the river appeared to thrive whilst the population on the western branch failed to establish and were not recorded during 2006 surveys. In 2008 water voles were found to have significantly extended their range downstream on the eastern branch of the river. Abundant water vole activity was also identified on the western branch, indicating that voles had migrated across from the eastern branch.

In 2010 water vole activity extended further upstream on both branches of the river and over 4km downstream of the original re-introduction site on the eastern branch. Forty eight sections of the Lower Windrush between Witney and Standlake were surveyed in 2013 with water vole activity identified on twenty seven sections (Map 1). Water voles were found to have extended further downstream on both branches of the river but were not recorded on a number of sections upstream at Ducklington where they had been found previously.

2016 Water Vole Survey Results

Forty two sections of the Lower Windrush between Witney and the confluence with the River Thames were surveyed in 2016 with water vole activity identified on thirty seven sections (Map 2). Water voles were found to have extended further downstream on both branches of the river with a particularly notable expansion on the western branch. Water voles were recorded on a number of survey sections between Witney and Ducklington, marking their return to the area that had negative results in 2013. Only five survey sections were negative for water voles and of these most had unsuitable habitat consisting of dense scrub or extensive bank trampling.

The main highlight of the survey season was the positive results on the survey sections immediately upstream of the confluence with the River Thames. Combined with positive survey results on the River Thames at Chimney Meadows, this means that the River Thames and River Cole Local Key Area and the River Windrush Local Key Area have now linked up to become one extensive LKA.

Mink Control

Mink control was initiated on the Lower Windrush by WildCRU prior to the re-introductions in 2005. Nineteen mink rafts were in use within the River Windrush Local Key Area during the 2016 trapping season but no mink were trapped. One mink was trapped on the River Thames at Standlake Common near to the confluence with the River Windrush (Map 2). Possible mink prints were recorded on ten survey stretches, highlighting the need for continued and persistent use of rafts to monitor and trap mink.

on the river. The mink rafts in place on the lower river may be particularly important in detecting mink dispersing upstream from the River Thames which is thought to be a major conduit for mink entering the area.

Habitat

Habitat on the lower river remains generally good for water voles although in some areas removal or thinning of trees and scrub could enhance habitat. In other areas evidence of trampled banks and livestock grazing (due to broken stock fencing) was apparent which had led to the degradation of potentially suitable habitat. The maintenance of livestock fences is essential to ensure suitable water vole habitat persists on the lower Windrush where livestock grazing is common.

Recommendations

The Water Vole Recovery Project should continue to work with the Lower Windrush Valley Project providing advice and support on habitat work and mink control as required. Although no mink were trapped on the lower river in 2016, evidence of mink was recorded throughout the survey area and a mink was trapped on a nearby reach of the River Thames. Effective monitoring and trapping using the mink rafts in place, especially near to the confluence with the Thames, will be crucial to the survival and continued expansion of the water vole population. Efforts should be made to maintain and extend the current level of mink monitoring on the river and to expand this up and downstream on the River Thames.

Positive habitat enhancements such as removal of scrub and maintenance of livestock fencing could be very beneficial in areas of the lower Windrush currently uninhabited by the water vole population, advice on this should be provided to landowners where appropriate.

Acknowledgements

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