

Whitchurch Community Water Vole Project

Water voles

Water voles are semi-aquatic mammals. They live along the banks of streams and pools, able to move about on land as well as in the water.

Voles live quite short lives, but breed when only a few weeks old. They have several litters during the summer months. The females make burrows in the banks and give birth to live young there, feeding them for a couple of weeks before they can fend for themselves.



Water voles are brown in colour: sometimes a reddish brown, sometimes darker. Their fur is so thick that their ears can scarcely be seen. Water voles have a chunky body and rounded face. Their tails are fairly short and thinly covered with fur. They are about the same size as a small Guinea Pig.

The Whitchurch Wildlife Trust is carrying out a survey of water voles this year

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Feeding habits of water voles

Water voles eat the leaves of plants that grow along the waterside, such as grasses, sweet rush and sedge, but not stinging nettles! You can tell when water voles have been feeding, because they use their sharp front teeth to cut diagonally across the leaf (compared with ducks, which tear the leaves, and other animals which bite them straight across).

Water voles graze the grass around their burrows, but they also store cut leaves in piles down by the water. These piles are called feeding stations.

Food plants for water voles



A feeding station (cut leaves)



Diagonal cuts



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Burrows

Water voles make burrow systems with several entrances. Some entrances will be seen along the bank, near the water. Others are on top of the bank, where the voles feed. Water voles often sit in their burrow entrances as we might sit by a door or window!

The burrows are about 4 centimetres across, much smaller than rabbit holes but bigger than the burrows of bank voles or shrews.

This one is quite hidden



Just looking!



Two entrances near the water



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Habitat

Water voles live along the banks of streams, ponds or fishing pools, where they are not too steep. They do not eat fish, so can live in quite small streams, although it is best if the water level does not change too much during the year.

Voles need plants such as grasses, sedge and rush to eat, but cannot live where the banks are overgrown by nettles or other tall plants. Sometimes they will eat leaves from overhanging trees.

Staggs Brook in the Country Park



Places to get out of the water

Grasses to eat

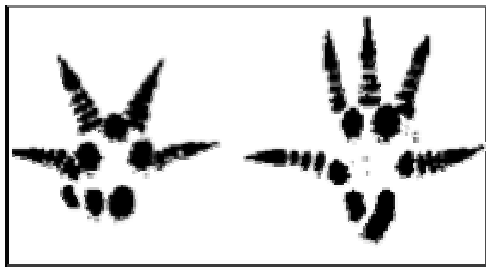


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Footprints and tracks

Water voles do not have webbed feet, even though they live a great deal in the water. Their claws leave a distinctive track, showing four claws on the front feet and five on the back.



Footprints are not always so easy to see! The claw prints may be incomplete or washed away by rain.

These are water vole tracks!



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Swimming voles

Here are some more photos of water voles, either swimming or near the water. When they go into the water, you can hear a 'plop'.



They swim near the bank



Water voles swim on the surface of the water



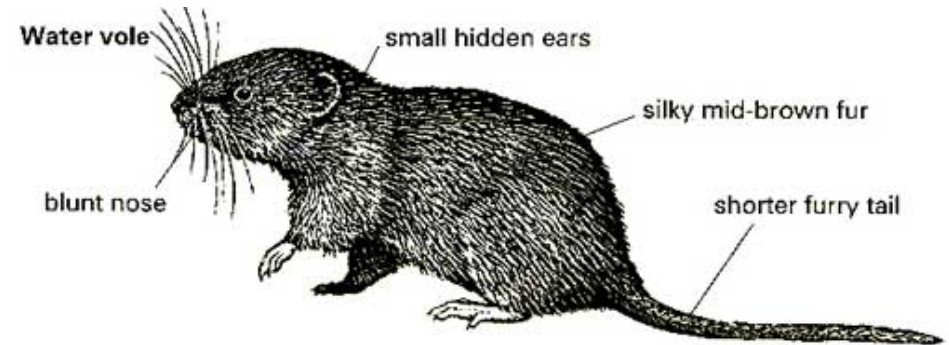
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Water voles are not rats!



Water voles are smaller than rats. They are chunkier, with rounder faces. Their fur is chestnut to dark brown, rather than grey-brown. Their tails are shorter and furry, compared with rats' longer, scaly tails. Their ears are smaller than rats', and hidden in their fur. Water voles eat vegetation along stream banks and do not kill other creatures.



Water voles can be confused with brown rats which are often found near water.



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Reasons for carrying out a survey

This is the logo for the project.



We hope to be able to help landowners and local authorities to protect these rare animals by improving the banks of streams and preventing too much interference with the water voles' habitat and food plants. Taking the existence of water voles into account when planning watercourse maintenance may improve the habitat considerably.

Water voles are protected by law. The number of places in England where water voles have been recorded has dropped by about 95% over the last fifteen years. This has been caused by both predation by mink and by habitat removal.

The Whitchurch area still has a significant water vole population. We aim to find out where the voles are, even though we cannot count them precisely, and to improve the habitat where possible, enabling the scattered population to link up along watercourses and so maintain genetic diversity.

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Predators

Mink are the main predators of water voles. The mink is a North American species that was farmed in the UK for its fur. Some animals were released or escaped into the wild, and have bred successfully, spreading across the country. Some mink have been seen in this area.

Mink live along the same watercourses as water voles. They are able to get their heads into water vole burrows, so can attack the young. Other native species such as otters cannot do this because they are too big. Fortunately, otters deter mink and have also been detected here.

Rats and cats also attack water voles. Rats go for the young, whereas cats catch adults as they are feeding.



Surprisingly, water voles can coexist quite easily with people, living along streams in parks, urban areas and in fishing pools. The voles' activities are less obvious than the burrows and feeding habits of rabbits or badgers.

Mink are small enough to get into water voles' burrows

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