

Essex Water Vole Recovery and Mink Project

Newsletter 7 - December 2016

Introduction

In the nine years since the Essex Water Vole Recovery Project was established, it has brought the species back from the brink of extinction. The coastal populations are currently stable, with mink control concentrated on preventing mink encroachment into these areas. Water voles have also returned to old haunts along brooks and streams across north Essex and two major water vole reintroductions have taken place on the River Colne and River Stort (read more on page 3) where water voles had been extinct for a decade or more. However on other rivers such as the Chelmer, Blackwater and Roding, to see a water vole is extremely rare and unfortunately mink are breeding freely. So in 2017, on the tenth anniversary of the Essex Water Vole Recovery Project, we need to refresh the existing network and expand into these final catchments where we still have problems.

The 2017 mink monitoring project

To target our efforts and encourage project members to get back into monitoring we are supplying easier to use mink rafts, a new county database that links into the Eastern Region Mink and Water Vole Project and offering assistance with raft checking at busy times of the year from our network of Volunteer River Wardens.

New "easy use" mink rafts - order your one now

We have taken delivery of 50 new style mink rafts. With a plastic base they are lighter to carry but have a robust wooden tunnel with a hinged lid to make it easier to check the clay pad for tracks without removing it. We would like to get these rafts out in February ahead of the next mink breeding season so please let me know if you would be willing to take one. We have had good results on the River Wid at Writtle with the first of these rafts, catching 4 mink between Oct-Nov 2016.

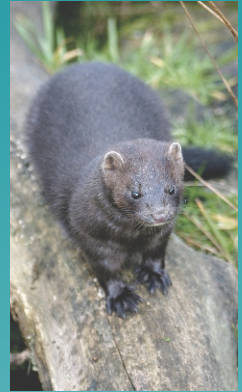
Benefits to other Wildlife

Although the mink project was initially set up to protect the last remaining water voles in Essex, the removal of mink has benefited a wide range of breeding birds including kingfisher, coot and grey wagtail.

Photos: David L Smith (kingfisher fledgling), Roger Hance (water vole) and Darren Tansley



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We need your mink records

If you have not yet passed on your mink results then please get in touch. The online form will take just a couple of minutes to fill in. Here you can also order rafts and traps, arrange repairs or request training and site visits. (For full details see page 2.)



Is your raft out of action?

Please let us know as soon as possible. We need to plan our repairs and replacements in order to update our maps.



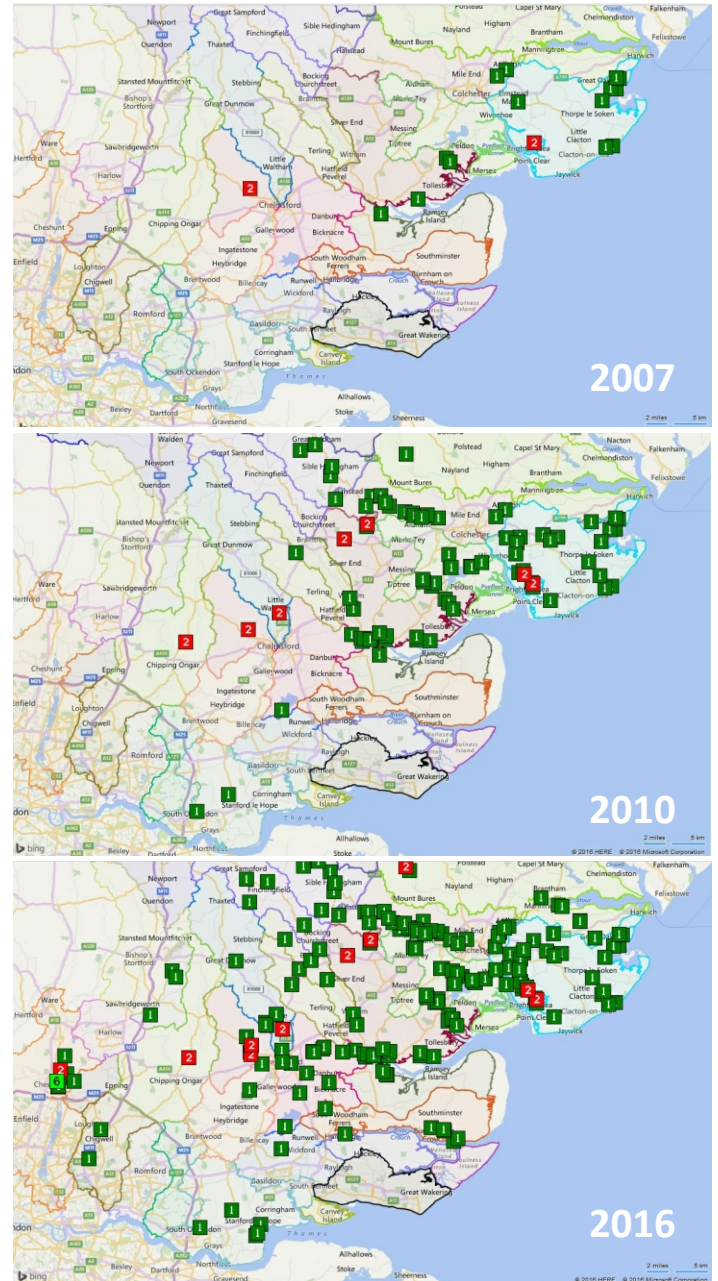
The Essex mink database

Keeping track of more than 300 Essex mink rafts and the various captures or records associated with the network has become almost impossible on our original system of spreadsheets. So in 2015 we secured funding to create a database which can log all this information and has the potential to link directly to other projects in the Eastern Region, such as the Norfolk Mink Project. This online system allows us to view the number of currently operating rafts, plot mink captures and process requests from landowners for repairs and replacements. This is a first for any region in the UK and should help us manage the mink control effort into the future.

In order to make the most of this new system we need your help as landowners, river managers, conservation staff and individuals to let us know about your mink captures for 2015-2016, equipment needs and contact details. Please contact me in whatever format you prefer (email, text, phone, post) but if you have access to the internet by far the easiest way both to help us and get a quick response is to respond via the link in the box below.

Tracking Progress

Mink rafts [1] and separate trap locations [2] in Essex from the years 2007, 2010 and 2016.



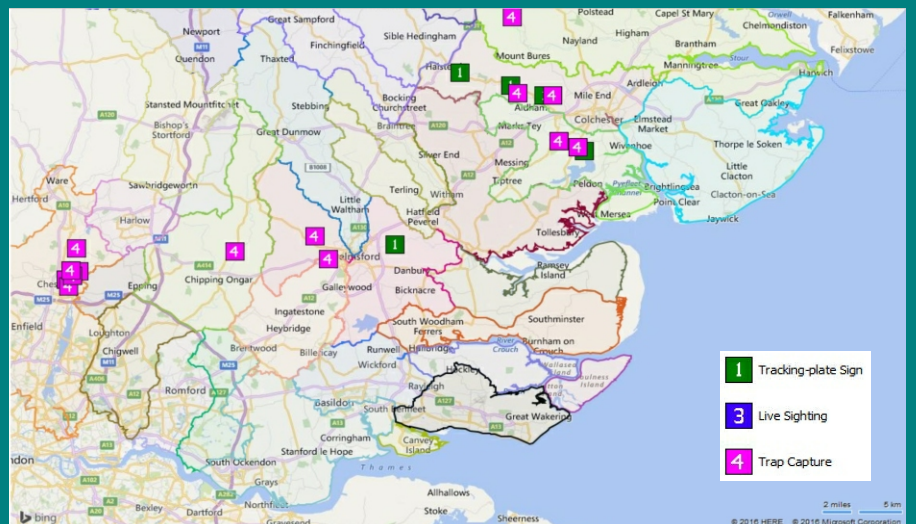
We need your mink records and equipment requests

Please go to our online reporting page at [Surveymonkey.co.uk/r/minkraft](https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/minkraft)

The map opposite shows all our mink signs and captures reported so far for 2015-2016. This is a very incomplete picture so if you have not yet passed on your results for 2015-2016 then please get in touch.

You can use the usual contact details on page 4 but to make things easier we now have an online form which will take just a couple of minutes to fill in. You can record mink captures, order new or replacements rafts and traps, request raft repairs or simply ask for advice and a free site visit.

Map right
Mink sightings and captures 2015/16



Essex River Wardens and help with mink raft monitoring

We realise that many landowners have quite pressing demands on their time but since 2014 we have been establishing a county-wide network of volunteer River Wardens, some of whom have been assisting landowners in maintaining and monitoring their rafts.

Currently River Wardens report pollution incidents, tackle problems with litter and undertake a range of water quality and wildlife surveys such as The Riverfly Initiative. This is a national project looking at aquatic insects that are fundamental for healthy fish populations and give an early warning of water quality problems.

In November 2016 the Essex River Wardens Project picked up a national award from the National Biodiversity Network at a ceremony in Edinburgh, demonstrating how valuable their efforts are.

If you need help at busy times of the year then let me know using the online form. Details about River Wardens can be found on the Essex Rivers Hub website.

www.essexrivershub.org.uk



Essex River Wardens monitoring water quality (top), clearing litter and debris (bottom) and receiving a National Award for Biological Recording (inset).

Water vole reintroductions in Essex - have they worked?

Mink control is usually effective in allowing water voles to naturally recolonise rivers and streams, but in catchments where water voles have been completely wiped out this is extremely unlikely. We have undertaken two major water vole reintroductions in Essex and along the Herts border to compliment habitat improvements and mink control.

River Colne - North Essex (2009-2014)

This project began with mink control across the whole catchment in 2009, then water vole releases of 600 animals between 2010-2012. It has been extremely successful and water voles can now be found throughout the Colne from Halstead to Colchester. Probably the best places to see water voles feeding are at Fordham Hall and Cymbeline Meadows, Colchester.

However not everything always goes according to plan and in 2010 we had a sudden mink incursion from a tributary near West Bergholt. Over the course of 18 days we removed 27 mink, most of which were young ones, probably from females that had bred away from our mink control efforts on the Colne itself. This illustrated the importance of our robust mink monitoring to back up the water vole release and ensured the success of the project.

River Stort - Essex/Herts border (2015-2016)

Thanks to a successful mink control operation along the River Stort over the course of 10 years, co-ordinated by Bob Reed, we were able to reintroduce water voles to the Thorley Wash nature reserve in June 2015 in conjunction with the Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust. The project, funded by the Environment Agency and Thames Water, involved releasing 188 animals, some of which were radio tracked to see where they dispersed. A mild winter allowed

them to survive better than expected and water voles have now recolonised approx 5km of the Stort Navigation arriving at our Sawbridgeworth Marsh nature reserve in Feb 2016 and Rushy Mead Reserve just south of Bishops Stortford in Sep 2016.

This reintroduction has only been possible due to a well co-ordinated local group of volunteer mink trappers and illustrates how important a network of mink monitoring is to the creation of a safe environment for water voles and other wildlife.



Left: June 2015. A water vole ready for release at Thorley Wash.

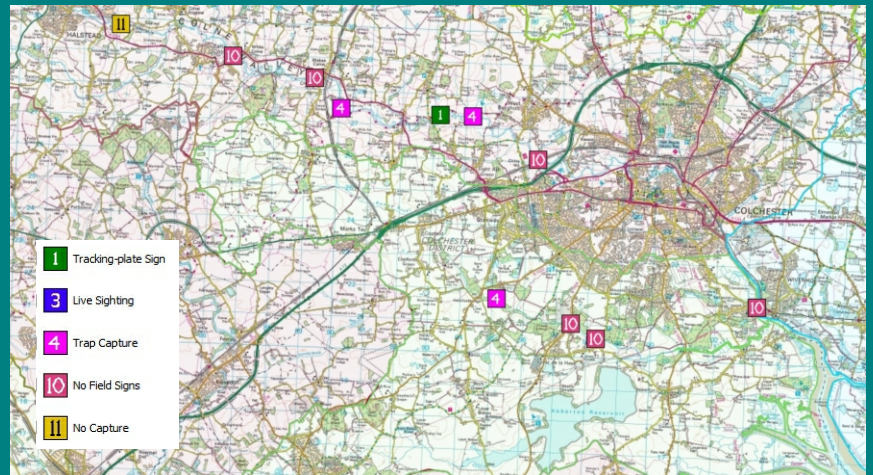
Top: Water vole on the River Colne near to Colchester in 2016 [Russell Savory]

Monitoring for mink but not finding any? We still need to know.

[SurveyMonkey.co.uk/r/minkraft](https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/minkraft)

The Water for Wildlife Project Officer at Essex Wildlife Trust continues to seek funding to keep the project running and provide free advice, training and assistance. In return we request records of your monitoring or captures during the year.

However we also map areas that have been monitored but have had no signs of mink. This is really important information to allow us to plot the areas where we are having an impact so please do let us know if you've had a mink raft or trap running but have had a mink free year.



“Mink Police” Remote Sensors

The Essex Game Guild have kindly funded the purchase of two Mink Police units; remote trap sensors used to alert us by text and email when a trap goes off. This has animal welfare benefits as animals spend less time in the cage and non-target species, such as water voles and water rail, can be released without delay. They are also useful in remote locations, or hard to reach areas, where it is not practical to physically check traps every day.



But although these units are extremely useful they cost £210 each (£200 if we order 4 at a time) so I cannot supply them

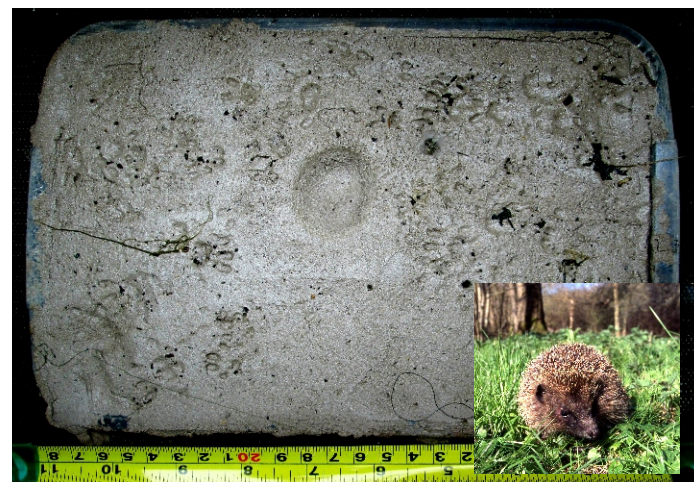
on long-term free loan as with the other equipment. If anyone wants to buy a Mink Police unit then I am happy to supply one at cost, install and set it up and provide free training on how to it operates. We can even link it into our Essex Mink Project online system. If you would like a unit on loan but cannot afford the full price please get in contact and we may be able to sort out an arrangement of joint funding of units for use by a group of individuals.

For more information about the units visit the official website. Make sure you click on the English language version as this is a Danish website!

www.minkpolice.dk (select English version)

And finally...

You never know what will turn up on a monitoring raft but when angler Peter Yates emailed a photo of the tracking plate on his River Wid mink raft, even Darren was surprised. The tracks were not the suspected brown rat or even a grey squirrel, but the footprints of a hedgehog! This is certainly a first for Essex.



Thank you again for your support and if you have any queries please contact:-

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