

AINA CASE STUDY

THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

The Middle Levels Water Vole Support Project



Water voles will use any board moored at the water's edge as a territorial platform, and this was a convenient way to check their presence

A three-year project has improved prospects for water voles in the Fens

A three-year scheme to conserve and encourage water vole populations in the Middle Levels achieved considerable success. The Middle Levels Water Vole Support Project was granted £50,000 from the Biffaward Landfill Tax programme to improve the fortunes of water voles in the Fenland drains and rivers. Additional funding and support came from the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Biodiversity Partnership, the Environment Agency and Natural England. The work has contributed to the UK Biodiversity Action Plan.

During the project water voles became more widely distributed throughout the Middle Levels and at many sites good colonies have now developed, with densities approaching those similar to the levels before American mink were unfortunately released into the wild. A control scheme based around the Internal Drainage Board drains and Middle Level waterways reduced mink numbers, and otters are also returning to their former waterway haunts. These appear to help the control of mink numbers, which in turn assists water vole recovery. A reduction in mink numbers, especially in early spring before the breeding season, has benefited not only water voles but other mink prey such as ducks, moorhen, coot, grebes and warblers.

The work also improved waterside habitat and the installation of 950 metres of pre-planted coir rolls as soft bank revetment at fifteen different sites created excellent conditions for water vole colonisation. This 'instant habitat', pre-established with sedges, grasses and other aquatic plants favoured by water voles, was laid on drain sides in a series of three-metre lengths. Surveys of indicator boards, placed at approximately one-kilometre intervals and a reliable means of checking for recent droppings, revealed an increase in water vole distribution between 15%-35% over the three years of the project. The true increase was probably higher since some boards disappeared or were swamped by rising water levels.

Public awareness of the threat by mink to water voles increased during the project and displays were taken to various events to promote the need for their further control. Mink traps are still available for loan to landowners, vole monitoring will continue and the public are invited to report sightings to the Environmental Officer for the Middle Level Commissioners.