

Good Practice Guide: protecting Water Voles during woodland management and forestry operations

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If you are relying on following good practice to keep within the law, then you:

- **must** take [reasonable avoidance measures to protect Water Voles](#)
- **should** follow as many of the [Top 5 actions to improve habitat for Water Voles](#) as you can.

Introduction

The Water Vole is one of the fastest-declining mammal species in Great Britain and is now considered critically endangered in Wales. Once widespread across Welsh rivers, streams, and wetlands, the species has suffered a 90% decline over the past 30 years, driven by habitat loss, pollution, and predation by the invasive American Mink.

Water Voles are now considered to be extinct in parts of Wales. Their current distribution is a fraction of what it was sixty years ago, although targeted conservation efforts have helped stabilise populations in some key areas. These include habitat restoration, mink control, and community-led monitoring and reintroduction programmes.

Water Voles inhabit slow-flowing rivers and streams, canals, reed beds, and marshes, preferring areas with tall, dense vegetation that provides food, cover, and nesting material. They can also thrive in upland areas which may act as population refuges and source populations for lowland areas. Rivers and wetlands within woodland habitats are often suitable for Water Vole.

Water Voles construct extensive burrow systems in steep banks, both above and below the waterline and where wetland habitat is suitable, they may be located far wider than the linear constraints of a watercourse. Their presence is closely tied to the quality and connectivity of riparian habitats.

As a priority species for conservation in Wales, the recovery of Water Vole depends on sustained efforts across sectors to restore habitats, manage invasive species, and engage local communities in long-term stewardship.

How are Water Voles protected?

Water Voles are a UK protected species under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. This means you must take reasonable measures to avoid harming them in a way that would be an offence, such as intentionally killing or injuring them, or intentionally or recklessly damaging, destroying or obstructing access to their burrows or disturbing them whilst they are using their burrows.

Whilst you should always aim to avoid any harm to protected species, a defence is available if harm to Water Voles occurs as the 'incidental result of a lawful operation' and 'could not reasonably have been avoided'. To rely on this defence, you will need to be able to demonstrate you took all reasonable measures to minimise the impact of your operation on the species. Showing that you followed the measures in this Good Practice Guide is one way to demonstrate that you did this.

Whilst woodland management may contribute towards maintaining the habitat conditions required by Water Voles, they can also be harmful if not managed sensitively, especially if they impact on the banks of watercourses where Water Voles have their burrows.

If you cannot avoid an offence by following this guidance, a competent ecologist may be able to develop alternative, site-specific, ways of working to enable you to keep within the law. If that is not possible you may need to reconsider your plans.

NRW does not have the power to issue licences permitting harm to UK protected species for the purpose of forestry.

Are Water Voles using your woodland?

With the Mammal Society, we have produced a guide [Protected species in woodlands: A field guide for woodland managers in Wales](#), containing specific advice on how to carry out surveys to check for protected species.

Checking for records

If you have a watercourse within your work area, you should check if there are records of Water Vole within 1 km. If there are, you should assume that Water Voles could be present.

If you apply for a felling licence, NRW will check for records. If we find records that suggest the presence of Water Voles, we will usually add an environmental condition to your felling licence requiring that you follow the measures in this guide.

Walkover survey

You should check any watercourse within your work area for signs of Water Voles or their burrows if you are within 1 km of a record. If there are no records you should remain vigilant for their presence as some populations are unknown.

[*Protected species in woodlands: A field guide for woodland managers in Wales*](#) will assist a competent person to do this.

Before you can implement the avoidance measures in the next section, you will need to have established the following:

1. Whether there are watercourses within or adjacent to your work area, if so:
 - a. Whether there are records of Water Voles within 1 km of your work area and/or any field signs indicating their presence, and
 - b. The location of any Water Vole burrows, if you intend to make a new crossing point.

Reasonable avoidance measures to protect Water Voles

If you are relying on following this good practice to keep within the law, you will need to adhere to the following measures. If you cannot do this, a competent ecologist may be able to suggest site-specific mitigations that may allow you to deviate from these standard measures without causing an offence. If this is not possible, you may need to change your plans.

If you unexpectedly find evidence of the species during work, you should consider whether you are able to apply the measures in this guide or seek advice from a competent ecologist.

When working near a watercourse where evidence (records or field signs) indicates that Water Vole are present, the following should be adhered to:

1. Protect watercourses and their banks

- Do not allow heavy machinery (harvesters, forwarders etc) to operate within 10 metres of the top of any riparian bank.
- Do not stack timber within 10 metres of the top of any riparian bank
- Avoid disturbing vegetation within 5 metres of the top of the riparian bank.

2. Check for Water Vole burrows if making new crossings

- Before making a new crossing point over a watercourse, you must check for evidence of Water Vole burrows.
- Wherever possible, any new crossing points should be made more than 10 metres from any Water Vole burrow.

Top 5 actions to improve habitat for Water Voles

Managing your woodland in line with the UKFS can deliver significant benefits for wildlife. The actions below would be particularly valuable for Water Voles, and will also support many other species:

1. Maintain and restore riparian vegetation

Provide wide, uncut margins (ideally 2-5 metres) of tall grasses, sedges, rushes, and emergent plants along watercourses. Avoid over-shading by dense tree cover; light shade from shrubs like bramble is beneficial.

2. Protect and enhance burrowing habitat

Ensure soft, undisturbed banks for burrow construction. Avoid planting trees or heavy machinery work on banks where Water Voles are present, as this can damage burrows.

3. Maintain water quality and stable water levels

Water Voles need slow-flowing or still water with a depth of at least 0.3 metres year-round to keep burrow entrances safe from predators and flooding and prevent pollution and excessive siltation.

4. Control predators and reduce disturbance

Implement American Mink control where feasible, as mink predation is a major cause of Water Vole decline. Time vegetation cutting for late summer and cut alternate banks to maintain refuge areas.

5. Improve habitat connectivity

Link suitable habitats along watercourses and between wetlands to allow dispersal and strengthen populations. Use woodland rides, riparian corridors, and connected wetland features to reduce isolation.

Further information

You can find more useful information on survey techniques and positive management approaches for Water Voles:

[Protected species in woodlands: A field guide for woodland managers in Wales](#)

[Guidance for woodland creation where water vole are present \(naturalresources.wales\)](#)

[The Water Vole Mitigation Handbook \(e-book\) — Mammal Society](#) eBook version available for purchase