

WATER VOLE FACT SHEET

General Characteristics

The water vole is the largest of the British voles, weighing between 200-350 g. Males are normally slightly larger than females. Both sexes have well developed scent glands on their sides.

The water vole is not particularly well adapted to an aquatic life style. Its feet are not webbed, it does not use its tail like a rudder and its fur becomes water logged after prolonged submergence.

When disturbed water voles splash dive into the water with a plop sound. This is thought to serve as a danger warning to other voles.

Diet

Water voles are herbivorous, 227 different species of plants have been recorded as part of their diet. They feed mainly on aerial stems and leaves of waterside plants especially reeds, sedges and tall herbs.

Habitat

Water voles live in a system of burrows in the banks of rivers, streams and ditches. The amount of bank-side and emergent vegetation is important as it provides both cover and food. A continuous swathe of tall and luxuriant waterside plants with at least 60% cover offers the best habitat. Areas shaded by trees and shrubs are less suitable.

Lifestyle

Water voles live in colonies along the riverbank. During the breeding season, March to October, both males and females establish territories. Female territories range in size from 30m to 150m and male territories from 60m to 300m. Territories are marked by piles of droppings, forming latrines. Latrines are scent marked by the voles stroking their hind feet across the scent glands on their flanks and drumming them on the latrine.

There are two to five litters per year of three to eight young. Early born young may breed before the autumn. Over winter mortality is very high with a loss of up to 70%.

Water voles do not hibernate but territoriality breaks down and water voles come together in burrows, presumably for warmth. Short periods of torpor may occur. During the winter voles tend to spend most of their time underground so signs of their presence are difficult to find.

Decline

The decline of the water vole is thought to be the fastest decline of any mammal recorded in the UK. The decline is mainly because of the predation by mink and population fragmentation. In some areas habitat loss has also played a part in the decline. The water vole is now extinct in some counties in England.

Much of the information in this sheet is taken from "The Mink and the Water Vole Analyses for Conservation " by D Macdonald and R. Strachan.