

Grants and incentives

Environmental Stewardship offers landowners payments to manage wetlands and habitat next to water. Entry Level Stewardship (ELS) pays £30/ha over the whole holding (£60 if registered organic or in conversion). The main options that can benefit water voles are for ditches, buffer strips of up to 12 m width, and field corners.

Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) gives direct payments for land of high wildlife value or potential. Many of the waterside land management options are well suited to helping water voles, and there are supplements for grazing and cutting. Payments for capital works include ditch restoration or creation, and all kinds of hardware associated with wetland and livestock management.

ELS can be done on its own, HLS normally has to be done together with ELS and is 'invitation only' so you need to talk to Natural England first on 01233 812525

The Lower Stour including Thanet is a 'priority catchment' for the **Catchment Sensitive Farming (CSF)** initiative. Through its catchment officers, CSF can offer landowners advice on practical steps to reduce impact on water and water quality, run workshops and events, and can even provide valuable tools such as soil management plans and sampling. There can also be capital works grants for items such as yard works, fencing watercourses and livestock tracks, all of which can help protect both the farm's valuable resources and the habitat of the water vole. Contact the Stour catchment officer on 01233 812525 to see what is available.

Regulations

In **Nitrate Vulnerable Zones (NVZ)** regulations govern when, how and where you can spread and store fertilisers and manures on land next to ditches and watercourses. No livestock manure can be spread (or stored in a field heap) within 10 m of a surface water and there are closed periods for some manures (bag fertilizer cannot spread within 2 m, closed periods also apply). For landowners claiming single farm payment, under **cross-compliance** rules a 'protection zone' extends 2 metres from the centre of a watercourse or 1 metre from the top of the bank, and you must not cultivate or apply fertilisers, dredgings, slurry, manure or pesticides within this zone. The same protection applies to ditches in ELS. Ask FWAG for more details of how NVZ and cross-compliance might affect you.

Lower Stour Water Vole Project

This information is part of a wider initiative – the Lower Stour Water Vole Project. This project will promote best practice management for water voles, research historical management of water courses and provide new literature. The project is being delivered by the Kentish Stour Countryside Partnership and Kent FWAG, with funding from Natural England and support from the Environment Agency and the River Stour Internal Drainage Board.

Contacts

Further information on the conservation of water voles and other wildlife in the Lower Stour Valley including grants and advisory visits can be obtained from:

Kent Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group

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Ashford
Kent TN25 5DB
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Telephone: 01233 813186

Kentish Stour Countryside Partnership

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Water Voles

A Guide for Landowners in the Lower Stour Valley



The importance of the Lower Stour Valley for wildlife has been recognised for some time and significant parts of this area are designated for their wildlife interest. One of the key species it is valued for is the water vole. A 2005 survey on the distribution of water voles in the Lower Stour, found that this area holds a population significant on a national level.

Water voles were once a common sight in wetland districts across Britain. However, this species has declined nationally by over 95% and is the fastest declining mammal in Europe. Water voles are now fully protected by law but are still in trouble. Reasons for their decline include mink predation and changes in land management (particularly ditches).

Landowners can play a vital role in ensuring that the Lower Stour remains a key stronghold for water voles. Farmers in this area are already doing much that benefits this species – this leaflet is intended to show what constitutes good management. In other instances, relatively small changes, such as preventing a ditch from drying out or scrubbing over, can make a real difference to voles and improve drainage.

This leaflet also highlights sources of advice and funding – managing for water voles can be financially beneficial too.

Distribution of water voles in the Lower Stour

The 2005 survey found that water voles were widely distributed across the Lower Stour Valley and generally were only absent in dry, recently re-profiled or very shaded ditches.



Brown rat

Recognising a water vole

Water voles are occasionally confused with brown rats. If you get a good view of an animal near a waterway try look at the tail: water voles have furry tails, brown rats have longer, bare tails. If you only catch a glimpse, look at ears and face shape. Brown rats have clearly visible ears and pointed faces. Water voles have a more rounded muzzle and their ears are largely hidden in fur. Water voles are also vegetarian while brown rats will feed on a range of foodstuffs and are often seen well away from the water's edge, especially near dwellings.



Water vole

Water voles and the law

In 2008 to reflect their status as the fastest declining mammal in western Europe, water voles became Fully Protected under a review of the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981). Under this Act not only are the water voles themselves legally protected but also their burrows and the places they use for shelter and breeding. It is therefore an offence to capture, injure or kill them or to damage, destroy or obstruct their breeding or resting places or to disturb them in their resting or breeding places.

To ensure that habitat managers are not prosecuted under this Act, the onus is fully on the land manager to show that they have followed current best practice guidelines in their maintenance of water vole habitat.

Best practice management

The complex ditch network that runs across the Lower Stour Valley is vital for the drainage and irrigation of this farming area. Sympathetic management of the ditches and waterways in this area will benefit a range of wildlife including water voles.

Ditches

- As a rule never clear all ditches of vegetation or silt at once as this removes all food sources and cover for water voles and other species. An eight year cycle of ditch clearance is recommended but where this is not possible try to provide a mosaic of ditches at different stages of vegetation growth, openness and age (photos 1 to 3).
- Work on short sections in rotation, leaving 20 to 30 metres untouched between sections as a refuge. Try to leave 1/3 of the ditch untouched in any one year. Leave a fringe of vegetation along the waters edge.
- Ditch work should be carried out in the autumn, when water vole populations are less vulnerable and plants will have seeded.
- Create bays and/or deeper pools within ditches, as these will provide a variety of habitat types for the benefit of many species.
- Dispose of spoil at least 2 metres away from the water's edge (photo' 4). This will ensure that water vole burrows and bankside vegetation are not smothered. Leave spoil overnight to allow invertebrates and amphibians to move back into the water.
- Work from one bank only with machinery, as far back from the water's edge as possible, to minimise compaction of vegetation and collapse of burrows (photo' 5).
- Create shelves and bays along the edges of straight ditches. These can be mowed and cleared less often and will provide refuges of wetland vegetation when ditches are cleared (photo' 6)
- Coppice bankside trees to create prevent overshading and encourage herbaceous growth.



Cutting, strimming and mowing

- Too frequent cutting of vegetation along water-courses removes food and cover for water voles and has significant consequences for populations when long sections are cut.
- It is best to cut short sections (30 to 50 metres) in late autumn (when breeding has finished) on a two or three year rotation. Cut one bank only in each section in any one year, leaving the opposite bank untouched (photo' 9).
- When water weed cutting it is best to cut only 1/3 of the channel width at any one time but as a minimum at least a dense fringe of vegetation should be left uncut at the water's edge (photo' 10).
- Where possible it is recommended that bankside vegetation is not cut to ground level but to around 15cms, as this ensure that water voles are left with some cover and food after each cut.
- Dispose of cuttings away from the buffer strip, to prevent smothering vegetation.



Watercourse margins and buffer strips

- Leaving a two metre or greater margin along a water-way provides cover and additional forage for water voles and a range of riparian and marginal species. These buffer strips also help to reduce the loss of top soil as runoff from arable land and decrease siltation rates. There is no need to plant margins – they can be allowed to colonise naturally (although sometimes sowing of plants like red clover can benefit other species).
- Margins should not be sprayed or treated with pesticides, herbicides or fertilisers. Some pesticides require a 5 m buffer zone to be left alongside watercourses, and other rules may apply (see 'Regulations', back page) .
- Bank poaching by cattle can, where significant, produce long sections of waterway with no vegetation or water vole burrows (photo' 7). Poaching should be reduced by fencing set back from the edge of the water-way to create a species-rich buffer strip habitat (photo 8). Create drinking bays in the fencing to allow access to water. Electric fencing can be used to help establish the buffer strip. Where fencing is not possible, stocking densities should ideally be no more than 5 cows or 10 sheep per hectare.

Reinstating and Restoring Ditches

- The majority of the ditches in the Lower Stour which do not contain water voles are those in a very late successional phase, scrubbed over and dry most of the year (photo 11). Where possible such abandoned ditches should be re-instated.
- Seek advice from the Kentish Stour Countryside Partnership or FWAG.