



Water voles

Our native water vole (*Arvicola amphibious*) is, because of its size, in fact more like a water 'rat' than a 'vole'. Made famous by 'Ratty' in Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows*, it is now scarce due to habitat loss and predation by mink. The water vole is Britain's fastest declining wild mammal.

Identification

Water voles are waterside mammals, preferring slow moving rivers and lakes, and can swim and dive really well. They prefer thick vegetation, which makes them difficult to see, and often the first sign that one is near is a 'plop' as the furry bundle enters the water. They have poor eye sight, and may let you watch them if you sit calmly and quietly. They can be found on some Yorkshire Wildlife Trust nature reserves, including Askham Bog, North Cave Wetlands and Wheldrake Ings.

There are four main ways to identify water voles, or the presence of water voles: appearance, feeding sites, latrines or toilets and tunnels or runways.



Water vole feeding on a root - Credit Elliott Neep (elliottneep.com)



Water vole - Credit Elliott Neep (elliottneep.com)

Appearance

Adult water voles have an 18-22cm body with a 4-11cm tail. They are much bigger and bulkier than common voles or mice, and sometimes get confused with the brown rat. Compared to the rat, however, their fur is a much richer chestnut or dark brown, which can look almost black when it is wet. They have a much shorter, rounded and stubbier nose than the rat, a much shorter furry tail and smaller, inconspicuous ears.

Feeding sites

These are really distinctive and consist of piles of foodstuffs like rushes, reeds, grasses and nettle. They are all cut to roughly the same size, about 10cm and with a 45 degree cut. The water vole holds the stalks with its front paws to eat, whilst it sits on its hind legs. Sometimes you can find stems growing with the tell-tale angle cut on shoots growing out of the ground nearby. Water voles will collect the foodstuff, bring it to the feeding station, and will prepare the food ready for consuming later. They also eat fruit and, as they don't hibernate, will store tubers and bulbs in their burrows in winter. They eat about 80% of their body weight each day.



so a plentiful food supply is essential. Sometimes they will create feeding rafts of vegetation which they can sit on to eat, or feeding lawns of short vegetation which have been grazed, near to their burrows.

Latrines or toilets

The droppings of water voles look like those of guinea pigs – they are brown and oval-shaped, a bit like a 5-10mm Tic Tac – and are deposited in regularly used and conspicuous latrines. These serve as a territorial warning to other water voles.

Tunnels or runways

Water voles create extensive tunnel systems through thick vegetation, which are about the same size as a Pringles crisp tube. Often an entrance is close to water level to enable a speedy getaway if needed. The tunnels are used day and night and when flooding occurs, the water vole moves to higher ground. The tunnels contain the living quarters and nests. Water voles have 3-4 litters a year, with 2-10 young, which are independent at 4 weeks.

Threats to water voles

Unfortunately, water voles are a favoured prey of many animals, especially the American mink, but also herons, owls, pike and otters. This, together with habitat fragmentation due to, for example marshland being



Brown rat - Credit Margaret Holland

drained, river banks being cleared and livestock trampling river edges, has led to small 'pockets' of water voles being especially vulnerable. Accidental persecution through pest control, because they are sometimes confused with the brown rat, has also led to the species becoming endangered and they are now a protected species. If you see an water vole, please let us know by emailing sightings@ywt.org.uk.

Find out more

If you are not a member then find out more about Yorkshire Wildlife Trust and how to become a member, plus more about the work we do for Yorkshire's wildlife by contacting us in the following ways:

A: 1 St George's Place, York, YO24 1GN

T: 01904 659570

E: info@ywt.org.uk



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American mink - Credit WildStock