





OTTERS IN DIBBINSDALE

Factfile

- *Scientific name:* Lutra Lutra
- *Habitat:* Along the banks of rivers, lakes and streams or the sea shore
- *Diet:* Mainly small fish and crabs but also small mammals and birds
- *Lifespan:* 5 years

Otters are famously curious, inquisitive and intelligent animals that enjoy the affection of many people because of these qualities. Seeing them playing and hunting in and along the banks of British rivers used to be a common sight not too long ago. However, the rapid decline in their numbers that began in the 1950's has led to this fantastic sight becoming a very rare treat. But now, after careful conservation, their numbers are increasing and they are spreading out across Britain once again.

The numbers of otters crashed in Britain in the 1950's and 1960's. This was mainly caused by pollution of the habitat of these creatures by pesticides, the most famous being DDT. These pesticides got into the waterways of the country and killed off the otters. Otters were also hunted for sport and for their pelts in this country which was a factor in the reduction in their numbers. This was banned in 1978, a start to the conservation of this fantastic animal. The Wildlife and Countryside Act of 1981 protected their resting sites (safe places such as small burrows where otters may rest in the day). This legislation has led to otters slowly reclaiming the land they lost.



At Dibbinsdale, we are doing our bit to try and support the resurgence of otters in our area. We are digging pools and scrapes adjacent to the river to provide a pollution-free habitat, not only for otters but for all wetland wildlife. We have also planted these pools with common reed which are able to filter dirty and polluted water. These green oases will hopefully in the future be able to provide a steady source of food to a growing otter population.

Nick Harvey

THE LIVES OF OTTERS



Holts

Otters live on the banks of rivers, lakes, streams and along the sea shore in burrows known as holts. One on the banks of a river in Norfolk is shown on the left. These holts are lined with soft grass and often have an underwater entrance as well as one above the water line. Otters sleep, rest, raise families, spend their lives in and around and inside these holts.

Diet and hunting

Otters are mainly nocturnal so prefer to hunt at night. They are expert swimmers due to their strong tails and webbed feet and look amazingly agile when hunting their preferred prey of fish and eels. Their sharp teeth can grip their prey well and allow them to carry it ashore to eat it. Otters also have strong jaws which allow them to crunch through the shells of crabs and crayfish. They have brilliant eyesight to be able to see in murky water and if that isn't good enough then they can use their very sensitive whiskers which can feel movements in the water. As well as this aquatic prey they can also eat small mammals and birds.



Otters are fantastic, playful and very intelligent mammals that are a joy if seen in the wild. We so often complain about the lack of wildlife in Britain and the drabness of what we do have. But otters defy this belief and should be greatly celebrated by the people of Britain.

Nick Harvey

WATER VOLES IN DIBBINSDALE

Factfile

- *Scientific name:* Arvicola Amphibius
- *Habitat:* Along the banks of slow moving rivers, streams and canals
- *Diet:* Mainly grass and plants near the water as well as at times fruit, buds and bulbs
- *Lifespan:* 2-3 years

The American Mink

This member of the weasel family first came to this country to fur farms in 1929. All the mink that live wild in Britain today are descendants of escapees from these farms. They live by the same waterways as the voles, which act as easy prey for the mink as the mink can follow their quarry down its burrow or into the water. However, mink numbers are starting to decline so there is hope for the water vole yet.



The common water vole lives in burrows dug into the banks of small waterways across the country. People often mistake them for rats when they see them, the character 'Ratty' from Kenneth Grahame's *Wind in the Willows* who, despite the name, is a water vole. These affable creatures have in recent years suffered, not at the hands of their enemy from the *Wind in the Willows*, the weasels, but due to the introduction of a foreign animal to Britain. The American Mink has almost wiped out the Water Vole in across the whole of Britain.



Whilst the vole population has been decimated by the invading minks, some estimates place their numbers 90% lower than a year ago; very recently there have been some promising reports. Whilst the minks aren't going away, there have been slight declines in their numbers. This is in part due to a mink trapping campaign taking place across the country. This is done by rafts that contain a humane cage trap that allows other animals that are captured to be released unharmed. Captured minks are destroyed. While this cull may seem inhumane, it must be remembered that the American mink should not be here, and its presence is not only threatening the existence of water voles but also that of other native animals such as shrews. If their numbers are not controlled these animals could soon die out completely.

Nick Harvey



THE LIVES OF WATER VOLES

Burrows

Water voles live in burrows dug into the banks of rivers, streams and canals. These burrows often have underwater entrances to give a secure route in and out of the burrow. These have a very complicated system of tunnels and nest chambers on various levels, the graduation of levels reducing the risks of flooding and the damage flooding does. These burrows can often be recognised by closely-grazed 'lawn' areas which can be seen outside burrow entrances. The picture on the right shows the entrance to water vole burrow in a bank.



Protecting Water Voles

A lot of rangers across the country are implementing conservation strategies to try and maintain water vole numbers. This includes trapping predatory mink, planting reed beds which provide security. There are also things that the public does which help to conserve water voles. It has been found that areas where lots of people walk their dogs have a larger population than normal because the presence of dogs keeps minks away from the area so that fewer voles in the area are predated.

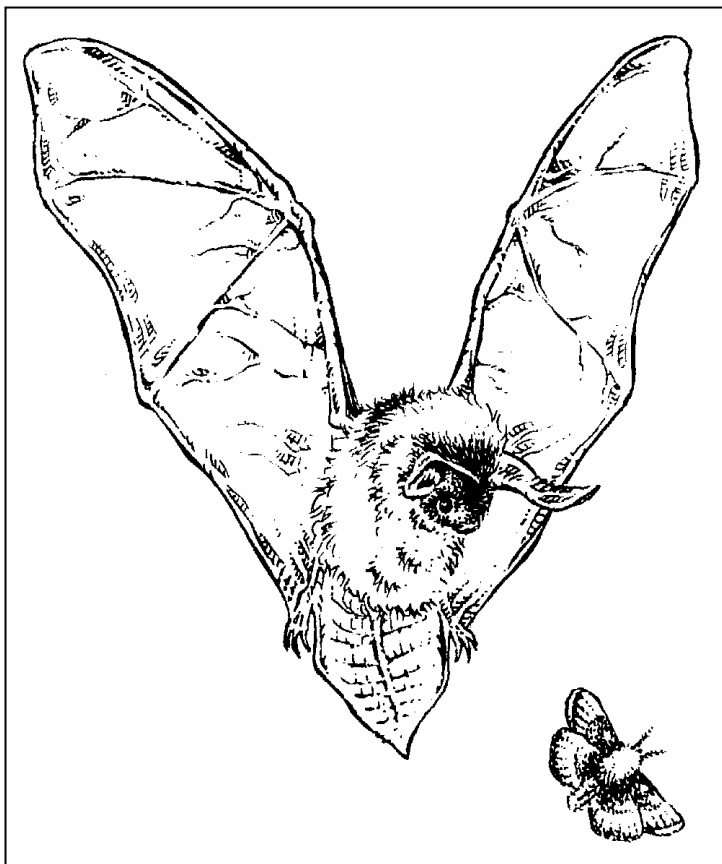
Water voles are herbivores and mainly eat grass and plants close to their burrows and waterways. Also, they will eat fruit, bulbs, roots, twigs and buds when these are available. In some areas of Europe, if there is enough food available to maintain a large population of these animals, then water vole plagues can take place. The voles will eat ravenously and can destroy fields of grass and leave swathes of land bare of vegetation. This can be devastating for farmers. Even though water voles are normally herbivores, ecologists in Wiltshire have discovered that local water voles have started eating frog legs and discarding the bodies, possibly to make up for a lack of protein in their diet.

The amiable water vole, loved by many as 'Ratty' has been devastated by the invading mink, but decisive action has stopped the collapse and things look brighter for this mammal. Nick Harvey

The Bat Tunnel Project

The bat tunnel





Checking bat roosts in a tree

Looking after bats

Bat workers help look after bats. Finding out where bats live ,or roost, is important .Bats are protected by law. Disturbing bats is a crime.

Bats can be looked after in a number of ways.

The best way is to look after the habitat in which they live. They often live in holes in trees. Leaving dead trees is important.

Giving bats a source of food and a place to hunt is also important. The insect on which they feed will like wet grassland, shrubs and trees and gardens that insecticides are not used.

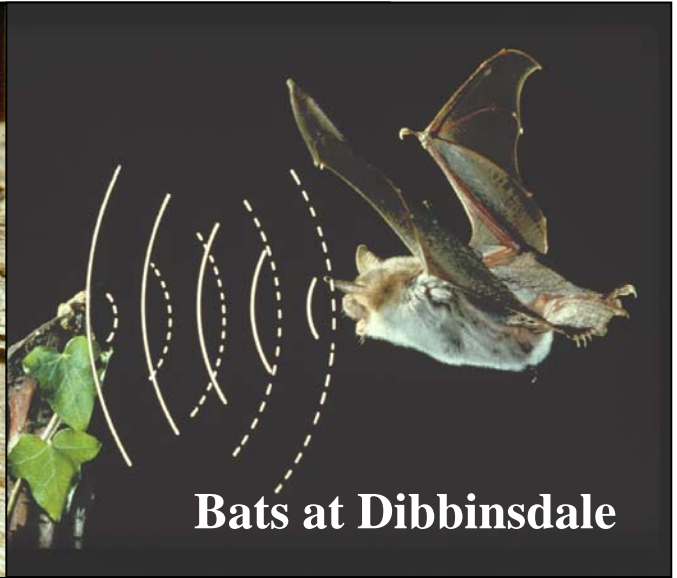
Bats can also roost in the roof space of houses and buildings. Care needs to be taken when doing home improvements- loft treatment and insulation for example.

Bat boxes will be used by bats and can be made as we do bird boxes.



Pipistrelle, Daubenton, Noctule and Brown Long eared **bats** are often seen in the reserve.

The most common bat is the pipistrelle. These are very small mammals. They would be able to fit into a matchbox



Bats use echo location to hunt for their food. They eat flying insects usually while in flight.

There are different types of bat that live in slightly different ways.

Daubenton bats are hunters over water. They skim the river and pond surface to eat mosquitoes and midges

Noctule bats on the other hand eat bigger insects like beetles and moths. They catch these usually above the tree tops



Bats wings are skin membrane over their fingers and arms. They have very good hearing. Their claws help them to hang down when asleep during the day and whilst hibernating. They have sharp needle like teeth. Their bodies are covered with fur. They are of no danger to humans.