

BASC



SITA trust

South Somerset & West Dorset Water Vole Project

Annual Report
Nov 2012–Nov 2013
(Year 2)





Background

This project is the continuation of the mink control programme which was started on the Somerset Levels in 2003. Led by BASC volunteers, wildfowling clubs, and shoot syndicates, we were quickly joined by the RSPB, fishery owners, county wildlife trusts and national nature reserve staff and helpers. Our long-term partners are the Environment Agency and Natural England. The trapping and monitoring area stretched from Gordano on the Bristol Channel to Martock in the south, and to date over 600 mink have been trapped and disposed of.

The result of this effort has been quite dramatic — wildfowl and waterside birds have had a respite from mink predation, and water voles have made a great come-back, re-occupying areas where they had been extinct for several decades.

Building on this, the SITA Trust provided the funding for the present project, which extends the operations upstream through the headwaters of the River Parrett and on southwards down the Brit and other West Dorset streams to the south coast.

This three-year project was launched in November 2011.

Synopsis of year 1 objectives and outcomes

1	Establish a Project Steering Group of key partners	Representatives from SITA Trust, NE, EA, DWT, EDDC, and BASC
2	Establish an effective Mink Control Network using volunteers and partners	Core teams recruited in Brit and Parrett catchments
3	Support volunteers and establish a recording/reporting system which is self-sustaining	Communication lines with core team established
4	Recruit and train volunteers/colleagues to assist in full catchment surveys for water voles	1x BASC staff member and four volunteers trained
5	Conduct the full catchment surveys in West Dorset and Parrett headwaters	Spring/summer floods prevented completion of Parrett and Brit surveys. Surveying on the Bride/Winniford/Char/Lim was not possible
6	Target potential habitat improvement sites for water voles	Potential sites identified during surveys
7	Develop a long-term legacy from the project	Potential volunteer co-ordinators identified
8	Raise public awareness by promoting the project	Displays at local country fairs. Press releases + <i>Biodiversity News</i> article, SWT Newsletter

Year 2 objectives

1. Continue project steering group meeting of key partners
2. Continue recruitment of an effective mink control network using volunteers and partners
3. Support volunteers and establish a recording/reporting system which is self-sustaining
4. Recruit and train volunteers/colleagues to assist monitoring known colonies of water voles
5. Conclude the full catchment surveys in West Dorset and Parrett headwaters
6. Identify potential habitat improvement sites for water voles
7. Develop a long-term legacy from the project
8. Raise public awareness by promoting the project.



1 Outcomes

Objective 1. Continue project steering group of key partners

A meeting was convened on 30 March 2012 at the Natural England Centre at Shapwick. Attending this meeting were representatives from Devon, Dorset, and Somerset offices of the Environment Agency, Somerset Wildlife Trust, and Natural England. Apologies were received from Dorset Wildlife Trust and the SITA Trust.

The aim of this meeting was to inform and describe the two major BASC Green Shoots projects in the region — the BASC/SITA Trust South Somerset and West Dorset project and the BASC/EA Devon and West Somerset Headwaters project.

The meeting decided that henceforward one joint steering group meeting for both projects should be held on an annual basis.

During the Steering Group meeting on 11 December 2012, the draft annual report covering December 2011 to December 2012 was distributed and discussed. With some minor amendments and additions, the report was approved.



Objective 2. Continue recruitment of an effective mink control network using volunteers and partners

R. Parrett. During the 2013 surveys carried out on the upper Parrett and its western tributary, the River Isle, landowner contact resulted in recruiting two further volunteers, and word-of-mouth recommendation produced two more on the Parrett-Yeo confluence.

In addition, a meeting with the Stoke-sub-Hamdon Angling Club has resulted in a further five club members joining the team.

Training has been given to these new additions to the volunteer team and a total of 32 rafts have been issued, together with the associated paperwork, record sheets and trapping guidelines.

West Dorset. The River Brit headwater and tributary surveys were carried out in May. Both the Asker and Mangerton rivers were targeted, together with the headwaters of the Brit to the north and west of Beaminster. Where water voles were detected, the landowners were approached in order to set up volunteers for monitoring the site and protecting against mink incursion. As a result, four additions were recruited into the west Dorset team covering the upper Asker, lower Mangerton, and the Walditch.

Following the September surveys of the Winniford, Lim, Char and Bride, a further two volunteers were recruited.

Recruitment of additional volunteers, particularly for the Winniford and Bride is required. Contacts have already been established to achieve this.

Objective 3. Support volunteers and establish a recording/reporting system which is self-sustaining

When rafts and traps are issued to the volunteer team, they also receive an information pack containing raft management guidelines, tracks and signs, despatch of mink, and detailed reporting procedures.

Initial reports are returned to me (my mobile phone and email address are included in the pack)

Every member of the volunteer team is made fully aware that this is a long-term effort which goes beyond the three-year project. Where possible, volunteers are 'paired up' to secure mutual support in the event of holidays or sickness, and each team member has contact details of neighbouring team members.

Objective 4. Recruit and train volunteers/colleagues to assist monitoring known colonies of water voles



James Green (BASC SW regional officer) in further survey training. R Mangerton site M1

In 2013, James Green (BASC regional officer) received further training in survey techniques, attending our surveys on the Mangerton and Asker. In addition, Roger Guppy, the secretary of the West Dorset Friends of Rivers Group accompanied the surveyors for a full day and became competent in survey techniques and field sign identification. He was also issued with two mink rafts for use on the Brit system. Further contact with Roger indicates that he has passed on his expertise to others of his group and will co-ordinate any information to report back to me.

Objective 5. Conclude the full catchment surveys in West Dorset and Parrett headwaters

All surveys were carried out in strict accordance with the survey protocols set out in the *Water Vole Handbook*.

The survey schedule for spring/summer 2012 was seriously disrupted by heavy rainfall and flooding. Therefore the 2013 surveys addressed three issues:

1. Conduct 'gap-filling' surveys in the upper Parrett and Isle system
2. Complete the survey schedule on the Brit system, together with the streams west of the Brit — Lim, Char, and Winniford.
3. Conduct present/absent walkabout surveys on the 2012 sites flooded in Feb/March 2013. This was to address concern that the level of flooding might have caused extinction at these sites.

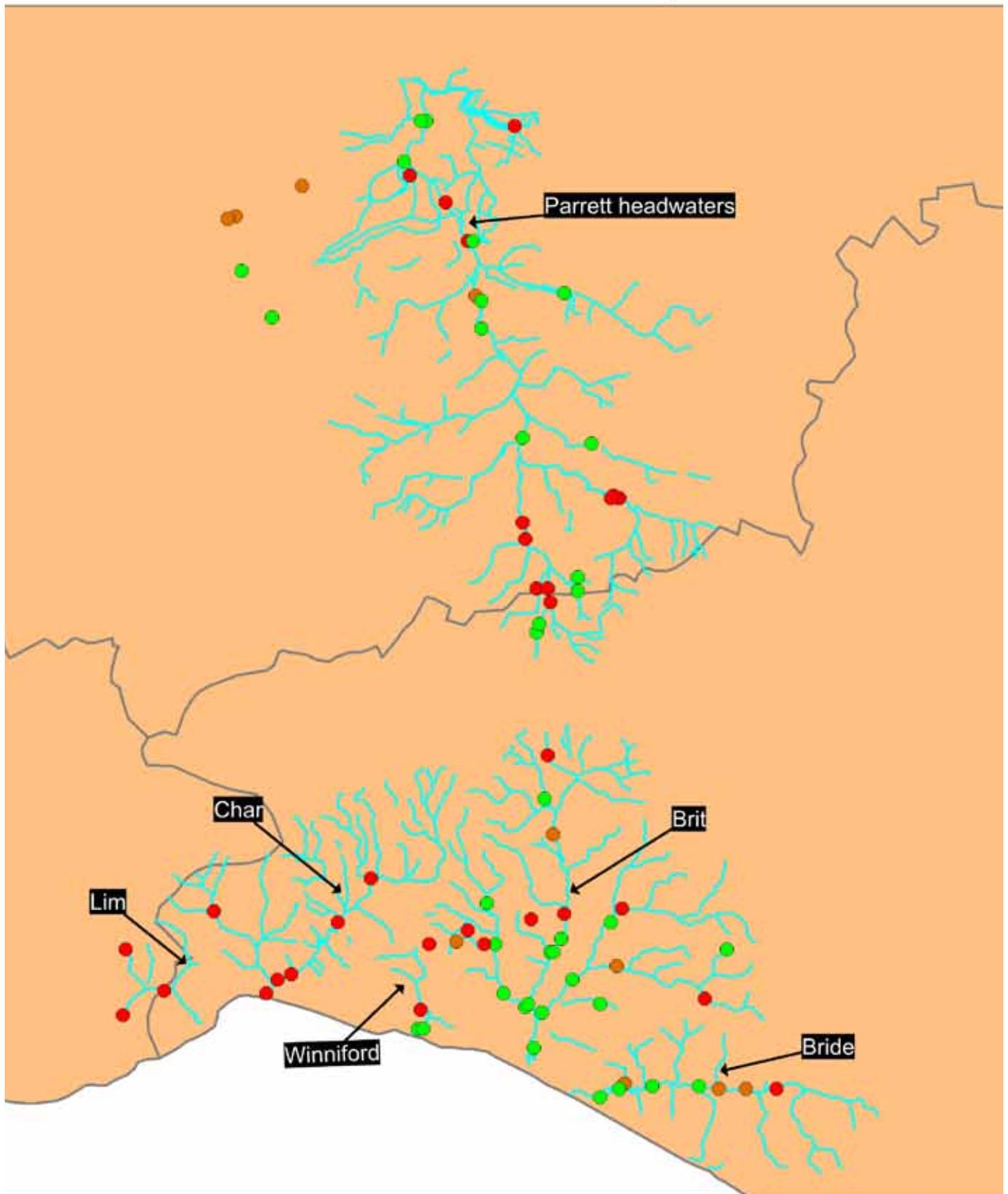
Detailed surveys have been carried out by BASC in partnership with Rookmarsh Ecology. Surveys covered nine sites in the upper Parrett and headwaters and at 29 sites within the West Dorset catchments. In addition, using aerial images as a primary selection method, a further 42 sites were visited but were deemed inhospitable environments for water voles and full surveys were not carried out.

Water vole presence was confirmed on the Isle (Parrett system), the Mangerton, Asker, Walditch, and upper Brit, and a previously undetected population discovered on the Winniford.

It was agreed that Dorset Wildlife Trust would share the survey tasks by surveying the Bride system, but availability of staff/volunteers prevented them from doing so. As a result, in September/October 2013, BASC/Rookmarsh Ecology conducted present/absent surveys on ten sites on the Bride, four sites with confirmed presence of water voles, three possible presence, and three absent.

Post-flood presence/absence surveys of the 2012 Parrett sites indicated that 2012 positive sites had been re-colonised by water voles, but that return to their approximate pre-flood locations was delayed until bank-side vegetation had re-grown to provide sufficient cover. This re-colonisation has also been confirmed from sightings by landowners and anglers.

Water vole surveys 2012-13



Key

- No evidence
- Not confirmed
- Present



**The site of the water vole colony,
R Winniford (site W2)
Left, during the April 2012 floods
Below, at time of survey, Sept 2013**

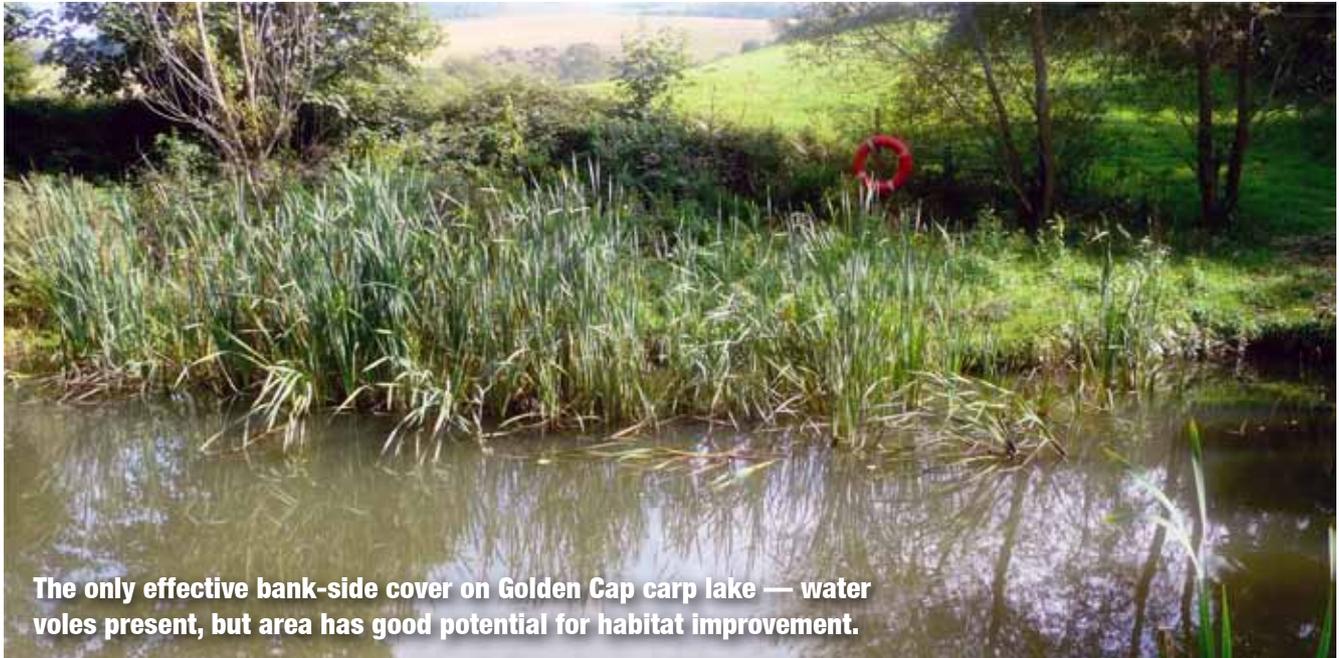


R. Parrett. Early post-flood re-visits (April 13) showed no evidence of re-colonisation until re-growth of bank-side vegetation. (Site P2)



Objective 6. Identify potential habitat improvement sites for water voles

During the course of each survey, each site has been assessed for its improvement potential. In 2013, three sites have been identified where simple electric fencing would prevent livestock trampling a watercourse that holds a water vole colony. Of the three sites, discussions are already taking place with two landowners and further meetings are planned for all three sites in 2014. It is anticipated that the conservation measures and funding streams will be agreed and set into motion by April.



On the Brit, Himalayan balsam poses a major problem which would require a serious and concerted multi-partner approach to control. On the Winniford, serious overshading by riverside woodland severely limits the potential for the identified colony to spread upstream, and the possibility of de-canopying the watercourse has been explored using DWT volunteers.

Objective 7. Develop a long-term legacy from the project.

The existing volunteer team, and those recruited in the future, are made aware of the long-term nature of water vole monitoring and mink control activities. It is hoped that by the completion of the three years, a robust reporting system will be in place to either BASC or to Dorset WT for continued operations. At present information sharing has been established between the two organisations and this will continue.

Objective 8. Raise public awareness by promoting the project.

Over the course of the year, reports, articles or news items of the project have been published in

- △ BASC magazine *Shooting & Conservation*
- △ National coverage in the *Daily Telegraph* (twice)
- △ Coverage in Bridport local newspapers
- △ Mentioned in a radio interview on BBC Somerset

Displays of the project activities have also been exhibited on the BASC stand at

- △ The Southwest Game Fair
- △ Devon County Show
- △ The Royal Bath & West Show
- △ Frampton Country Fair
- △ On the DWT stand at the Melplash Show

This project is funded by BASC and SITA Trust



Historically, the 2003–2012 Somerset Levels Project was funded by



Working in collaboration with



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22 November 2013.*

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