



NORFOLK MINK PROJECT

Annual Newsletter 7, January – December 2019

*** Website <https://thenorfolkproject.org.uk/> ***



* Our website is now regularly used by the public to report sightings *

2019 STATISTICS

Total Mink Caught	78
Rafts Deployed	465
Traps on Loan	449
Volunteers Involved	305

It has been another busy year for the project and, although the number of mink caught has gone back up again compared to last year (50), we still have far fewer mink in the county than when the project started. However, an increase always leaves me wondering if we missed a number last year or are we improving our control? The answer is likely to be, a bit of both! Some of the increase is due to the project now having more resource in the far west of the county, with new areas being trapped, and also an improvement in efficiency through the increased use of automated trap monitoring devices. Also, at our current level of control, we miss some mink each year that will go on to breed and there is a degree of immigration.

To protect our wildlife from mink we have two options, either continue with control indefinitely or, if it is feasible, to try and eradicate them. Eradication completely removes the threat to native species and will be much less costly in the long term, but is it possible? For a number of reasons we believe that the time is now right to go for eradication and this is set out in more detail later. But first we should look at what we achieved together in 2019.

Figure 1. Annual totals of mink taken by catchment 2013-19

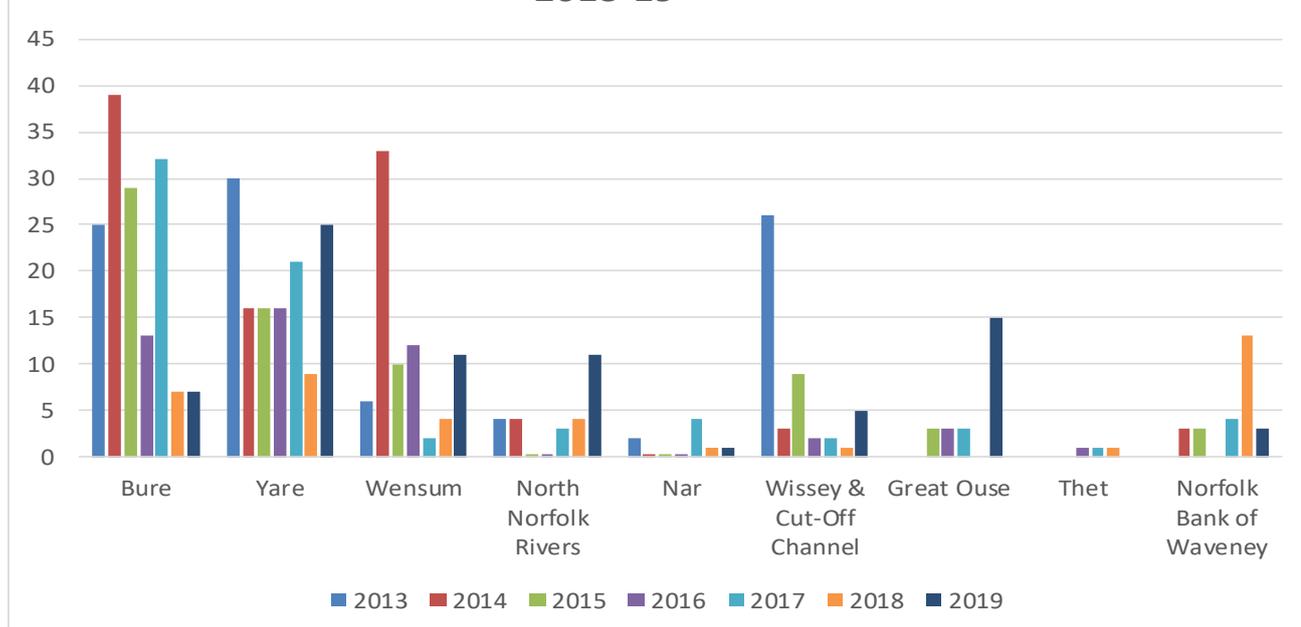


Figure 1 shows that it is the Yare, Great Ouse, North Norfolk and Wensum where the number of mink caught have gone up over the past year. This is shown graphically in Figure 2 with clear 'hotspots' to the very west of the county around the confluence of the Great Ouse and the Wissey, along the Glaven in North Norfolk and in the middle reaches of the Yare.

Figure 2. Number of mink events (captures, sightings, field sign etc) per tetrad in 2019

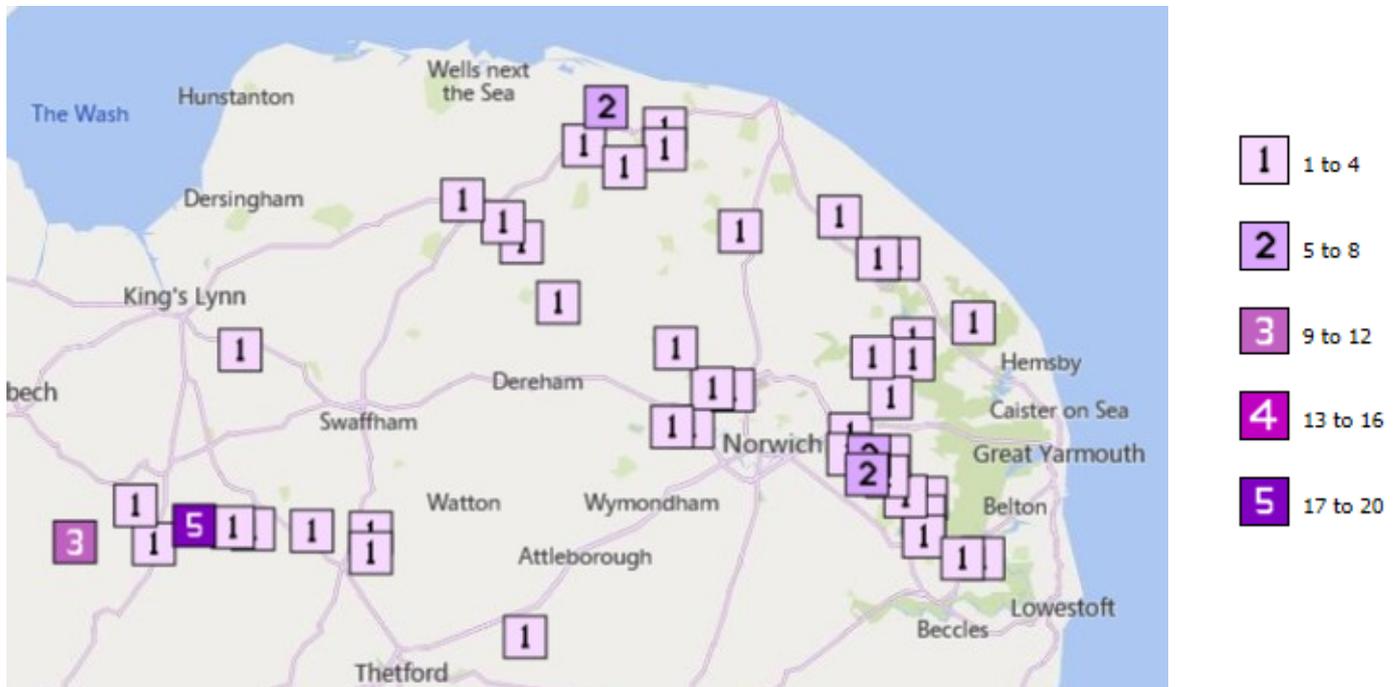


Figure 3 shows the distribution of mink rafts in Norfolk in 2020, although we recognise that not all of them will be active all the time. In addition there are over 100 sites which also have traps available to be set on the bank but are not shown this year as there is only so much you can fit on a map at this scale.



Figure 3
Raft positions
current at some
point in 2019

CATCHMENT REPORTS FROM OUR CO-ORDINATORS

BURE, YARE & THET

Stephen Mace

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MINK CAUGHT & STATUS 2019

Number caught in previous year ()

Bure 7 (7)

Yare 25 (9)

Thet 0 (1)

Bure

Numbers in the Bure remain low for a second successive year, only 7 caught in total. Most of these were caught in the broads area again, around Hickling and Horning. However we did have some sightings at Ingworth on the Bure and footprints by the Dilham Canal between North Walsham and Swafield, where we didn't catch. There could be mink in these area's during 2020 for us to watch out for. With the numbers being so low for the last two years it shows the great work and effort that everyone is putting in.

Yare

We have seen a sharp increase in numbers in the Yare for 2019, going from 9 in 2018 to 25 caught in 2019, back to roughly where we were previously. The bulk of the mink caught were between Norton Subcourse and Strumpshaw with a few sightings in the Brundall area. We were helped by some funding we were able to get from the Water, Mills and Marshes project that enabled us to purchase some extra equipment, including remote trap monitoring devices. With this equip-

ment we caught 13 mink along that stretch of the river; I'm sure without it we wouldn't have caught nearly as many in this area and next year we would have had an even bigger problem. The mink included the silver coloured one shown on the left, caught at Hardley. Thank you to everyone for all the hard work this year,



hopefully with the new equipment in place we can start to get on top of them here.

Thet

The Thet is very quiet at the moment with no mink caught in 2019, and with only the one sighting near East Harling which sadly eluded us. I do expect there are a few mink roaming around, however in very small numbers. I'm looking for more landowners who may be willing to help out and monitor a raft, if you may know of anyone please pass on my details.

North Norfolk Rivers
GT. OUSE & NAR

Rory Hart

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MINK CAUGHT & STATUS 2018	North Norfolk	11 (4)	
Number caught in previous year ()	Great Ouse	15 (0)	
	Nar	1 (1)	

North Norfolk Rivers

The spring and summer of 2019 were quite busy with a number of reports, including several sightings. We had a total of 9 mink trapped over the area as a whole plus reports of two mink killed on the road. As in previous years, the Glaven was where most were caught. We have also had reports from other rivers and the number of volunteers using project equipment has grown in several catchments. The Norfolk Rivers Restoration project have been extremely supportive by making landowners and managers aware of the Mink Project, leading to an increase of effort on the river Babbingley.

Trail cameras are continuing to be a great asset in positively identifying species. On one occasion a household with a very small, (dustbin lid size) raised pond saw a 'mink' in the garden. The fish in the pond were protected by a mesh net and trail camera footage showed in great detail an adult otter.

Great Ouse

There has been a marked increase in reports of mink activity on the river, it's network of tributaries and drains. Fourteen mink were trapped and another individual shot during 2019. It is encouraging that trapping effort has been so successful but clearly concerning that so many animals are present in the first place. The use of automated trap monitoring devices (mainly 'Remoti') has been very successful. The remote devices allow continuous trapping effort and constant reporting, vastly reducing the time spent in trap checking required each day. A further advantage is that more difficult to reach sites can be trapped making coverage of an area more robust. The increased success of the project in the extreme west of the county has very largely been down to the efforts of professional scientists who live locally who have engaged and encouraged volunteers and sourced additional equipment. This has led to the development of an active group in the area all using rafts fitted with 'Remoti', which should start to address the problem of mink in the catchment. Any assistance to increase the presence of volunteers would be greatly appreciated.

Nar

Captures and sighting of mink in this area continues to be low, only a single animal was taken in 2019. This is an encouraging situation, however as with the Great Ouse, I am not complacent and think that under recording is more probable than an absence of mink. The Nar appears to have all the habitat requirements that would support a breeding population, especially in the old gravel workings. We are planning to place a number of automatic reporting traps on the catchment in 2020. The aims are to increase the presence of the project on the river and also to try and identify areas where mink have been overlooked, as has been the case on the Great Ouse.

WENSUM AND WISSEY**Paul Gambling**07899 756107 wildlife@paulgambling.com**MINK KILL & STATUS 2018**

Number caught in previous year ()

Wensum 11 (4)**Wissey 5 (1)****Wensum**

This year has seen a sudden rise in mink numbers caught compared with 2018, all bar one on the middle to lower reaches of the river from North Elmham to Hellesdon. Over half of these were bagged by one highly experienced and dedicated trapper. Many thanks, Colin, brilliant effort. The other captures were the result of patience and dedication by a small number of trappers and many thanks go to them. Another mink failed to dodge the traffic at North Elmham. The unexpected rise does make one suspect that there may still be mink in pockets along the main river and tributaries where there are no volunteers or rafts to monitor, or that they are entering the catchment from bordering areas. With fewer people monitoring over the last couple of years, it's impossible to tell which. So, if you do know anyone who might be interested in starting monitoring or resuming again, please do let me know. Good news is that there do seem to be fewer mink in the upper reaches, from the source of the Wensum to North Elmham, just one occurrence of footprints on a raft and one capture.

Wissey

Mink are still present on the middle and lower Wissey from STANTA to Hilgay and beyond to the River Great Ouse. There were slightly fewer field signs in 2019 than in 2018, but several more captures. They were all caught at the same small area in August-September, when the juveniles disperse, and comprised 3 juveniles, 1 adult female, and 1 unidentified. So, it's very likely that all the captures were from the same family of mink and possible that the adult female was the mother. Curiously, since male mink take no part in the rearing of young, large footprints were found on a site very close by at about the same time, so there may have been a male in the area too. All captures were at an important water vole colony, and prevented a catastrophe there. This was only possible through vigilance, monitoring the mink rafts regularly, and the use of remote trap monitoring devices, without which the long term trapping required would not have been possible.

Very good news: The Lower Wissey Facilitation Group has, via Natural England funding and help from Tony Martin who is driving the mink elimination project, acquired 10 rafts with double tunnels and traps. They have been equipped with Remoti mink trap monitors. This significantly increases the number of rafts and traps operating near the junction of the Wissey and Great Ouse. Trapping mink in this area before they can travel up the Wissey is essential to limiting migration into the Wissey catchment.

WAVENY AND LITTLE OUSE**Penny Hemphill**01473 890089 pennyhemphill@suffolkwildlifetrust.org**Stephen Mace** (Norfolk bank of Waveny)07920 522054 macey@stephenmace.co.uk

MINK CAUGHT & STATUS 2018

Number caught in previous year ()

Waveney 39 (43) ●**Little Ouse** 11 (21) ●**Waveney**

The Suffolk project does the majority of trapping in our southern boundary catchments. Suffolk has seen the number of mink taken in the county increase to 112 in 2019. The majority of these have been from the two large rivers bounding the county to the north and south, the Waveney and the Stour. One site on the Waveney was particularly prolific, with half of the catchment total taken at one bankside trapping site, where mink were crossing from the main river into a Wildlife Trust Reserve.

The Norfolk part of the catchment has been relatively quiet this year with only 3 mink caught and all of these were at Haddiscoe. Some new equipment has also gone with the help of the funding provided by the Water, Mills and Marshes project, meaning we now have a few traps in place permanently, which have remote monitoring devices on them. If anyone knows of any landowners who might be interested in joining the project please pass on my (Stephen) contact information.

Little Ouse

The numbers taken have halved this year, hopefully we can keep the population down!

Male or Female?

Knowing the sex of mink that are caught is extremely helpful, especially as the population declines. When trying to control any population, it is the females that are particularly important and knowing where they are most likely to be found can make control more effective. A quick refresher might therefore be helpful. There is clearly a big size difference be-



tween the sexes, with adult males (900g—2kg) around twice the size of adult females (550g-850g). However juvenile males clearly overlap with adult females in weight and to be sure of the sex, it is best to look at the genital region. Here, as shown above, there is a substantially greater distance between the urinary tract and anus in males than females. Please check the sex of any mink carefully and let your Co-ordinator know when you report a capture.

GENOTYPING

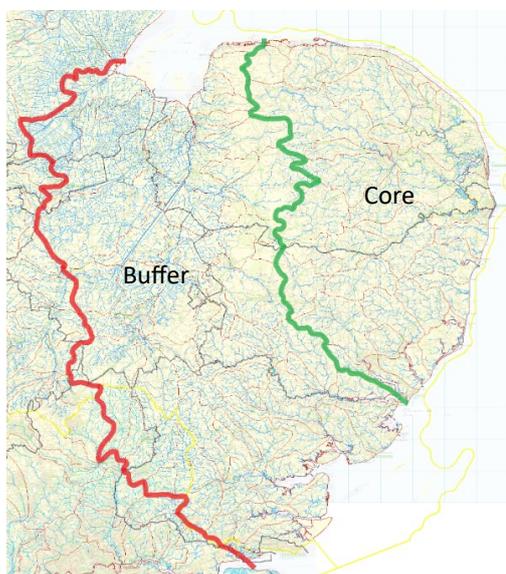
Have you ever wondered if a mink you caught was related to one caught previously or how far it may have travelled? Thanks to a kind free offer from Professor Bill Amos at Cambridge University we can now look at the genotype of all mink caught and sampled and tell, mother, father and siblings. This also potentially tells us a lot about the dispersal of animals from where they are born, as well as how they are related, and who we might not yet have caught!

We just need a small sample of skin to send to Bill, ideally the tip of an ear. These are ideally stored in alcohol filled tubes designed for the purpose. Your Co-ordinator will be pleased to come out and take a sample from a mink you have dispatched or you can take a sample yourself and keep it in a plastic bag in the freezer until a Co-ordinator can collect it. If you are likely to catch a few mink then we can leave you a few sample tubes in which to collect the samples yourself. We would ideally like to take a sample from all mink caught, to better understand what is going on with the population, so please contact your Co-ordinator as soon as you catch a mink, to arrange to get a sample collected.

WATERLIFE RECOVERY EAST: MINK FREE EAST ANGLIA

The last Newsletter included a piece about starting a pilot study to look at the feasibility of completely eradicating mink from a large area in England to help protect our wildlife. This has now progressed significantly and, following a well attended open meeting at the BTO in Thetford, a project entitled Waterlife Recovery East (WRE) has been started. This has a Steering Group representing the main groups involved with mink control in East Anglia (including ourselves) along with conservation, academic, fishing and shooting representatives.

The group has a clear agreed vision of how we need to proceed. In this, there would be a Core area, where the objective would be the complete elimination of mink and a surrounding 60 km deep Buffer area, trapped at the same intensity as the Core. The Core is likely to be the eastern two thirds of Norfolk plus north eastern part Suffolk and the Buffer area would include the remainder of Norfolk, Suffolk, Essex, Cambridgeshire and some small parts of adjoining counties. This recognises that there will be immigration from outside the Buffer area so some mink will always be caught in this area but hopefully none will make it to the Core.



What makes this feasible now is a number of new innovations becoming available, such as automated trap monitoring devices (e.g. *Remoti*), which let the trapper know when something has been caught, avoiding the need to physically check the trap daily. To comply with trapping legislation the device sends daily 'heartbeat' messages to your mobile to let you know the device is working properly, the trap has not been tripped, and nothing has been caught

that you have not been alerted to. Another innovation is the ability, as described above, to read mink genotypes which, at low population levels, allow us to understand where any mink caught might have come from and who they are related to.

The Norfolk Mink Project and similar projects in other counties in the project area would continue as individual entities but co-operate to achieve the overall objective. The WRE Project will co-ordinate the overall strategy and seek the additional substantial funding that will be needed to move from the good level of control that we already have, to eradication; a significantly greater challenge!

ADDITIONAL SUPPORT THIS YEAR

We manage to run the whole project on about £15,000 a year, provided by contributions from our key financial backers: Norfolk County Council, the Water Management Alliance (the IDBs), the Environment Agency and the Broads Authority. We are enormously grateful for this ongoing support but this year we were fortunate to obtain a grant of nearly £5,000 from the Water, Mills and Marshes Project to put an additional 12 rafts, equipped with automated trapping devices, out in Broadland. We also received 12 *Remoti* devices from Natural England to support our work and also encouragement from their Chief Scientist.

We received a kind donation that allowed us to purchase 2 further *Remoti* to help make our trapping even more effective. *If you are able to help with a donation (£100 will purchase a Remoti) please do contact your Co-ordinator who will be more than willing to help!*

AND FINALLY

Joe Kenworthy who had been our contact at County Hall and the representative for the Lead Partner in the Project, has moved to a new job and we await his successor. In the interim Martin Horlock is covering as our representative. Joe did a great job while he was with us and we wish him well for the future.

The impact of the Coronavirus pandemic will eventually reduce but just a reminder that in the meantime please follow government guidelines if you are able to continue monitoring / trapping. If you cannot continue, please ensure that no traps are left set and ideally move rafts from the water to safe storage.

As always, from all of us involved with managing, financing and co-ordinating our Project, a huge thank you to all our volunteers.

Simon Baker

Chair of the Steering Group and editor of the Newsletter |

