

Environmental Standard Operating Procedure

ESOP Name	Working with water voles
ESOP Number	10
Revision Date	22/02/2024
Related ESOPs	3 Bankside sediment disposal 5 Dyke maintenance 6 Erosion protection 9 Reed rond creation 26 Reed rond reuse



Aim

Water edge habitats provide ideal environments for the water vole, a species of principle importance in England which receives full protection under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. Dredging disposal and sediment re-profiling as part of navigation works are examples of tasks which can impact on water voles. There are also routine habitat management activities that are essential to maintaining a healthy environment for water voles but still need to be undertaken in a sensitive way, avoiding impacts on the species and its habitat.

This procedure describes working practices that aim to comply with protected species legislation & best practice guidance which protects both the animals and their habitat. It aims to avoid the disturbance, injury or killing of water voles or destruction of their habitats where dredging disposal, or other works, have the potential to cause impact. Where works cannot avoid impacts, a wildlife licence may be required.

Standard Methodology for Navigation/Construction Works

Works to be identified at least 18 months prior so that an ecological assessment can be undertaken in advance of the main water vole survey season.

If habitat is assessed as suitable for water voles and/or signs are observed during the ecological assessment, an initial water vole survey is to be undertaken between April and June, following the Water Vole Handbook best practice guidelines. If survey results indicate a population is present, with burrows, and the planned works cannot be designed to remove impacts to the voles and their burrows, a second survey will be undertaken between June and September to feed into the wildlife licensing application process.

If habitat is sub-optimal for water voles and no signs are recorded, it may be appropriate to cut the vegetation within the planned zone of works and keep the vegetation at ground level to keep the area in an undesirable state. This will need to be determined on a site-by-site basis.

Where any vegetation removal is deemed necessary for machinery access and/or line of sight in areas inhabited by water voles, the animals themselves and their burrows should be left undisturbed and vegetation left at least knee high to maintain cover. Machinery will be sized and placed so as not disturb or break the bank surface and a 3m zone of uncut vegetation should be left between the water's edge and the working zone.

Procedure

Pre-works

- Eighteen months before works begin, Ecologists to identify area to be impacted by proposed works, through consultation with Rivers Engineer and undertake an ecological assessment (considers all species/habitat impacts)
- If habitat is assessed as suitable for water voles and/or signs are observed during the ecological assessment, an initial water vole survey is to be undertaken between April and June to assess water vole presence/population and determine mitigation requirements. Depending on survey findings, appropriate mitigation will be to either design the works so as not to damage or disturb water voles, or a wildlife licence will be required to undertake activities, such as displacement or capture and translocation. If the latter is required, a second survey will be needed between June and September.

Standard Methodology for Routine Works

The following section describes the Standard Operating Procedure when working in water vole habitat **without** a wildlife licence. This covers routine activities that are required to maintain water vole habitat, such as dyke maintenance and utilises a methodology that avoids damage or harm. This approach can also be used for other activities where it is possible for the works to be undertaken without a licence.

Operational

Water Vole working requirements where operating **without** a wildlife licence:

- Works must be designed to avoid damage and disturbance to water voles and their habitat.
- Works to take place between September/October and March.
- Leave an uncut and untracked zone, 3m from water's edge, unless stated differently in method statement.
- Where dyke maintenance is being undertaken, remove sediment from centre of dyke only with both dyke edges to be left untouched. Use an extendable digger arm to ensure the digger can reach the centre of the ditch and still be located 3m from the bank edge.
- Slubbings to be placed 3 metres from bank edge
- Vegetation that requires cutting will be identified by Ecologist and areas mapped. Hand operated cutters or tractor mounted cutters where appropriate will manage the area as stated in the method statement
- Avoid excessive trampling along water's edge and bankside habitat as far as possible.
- Any variation from or inability to follow this procedure must be discussed with an Ecologist.

Consultation

The following must be confirmed by the Ecology team before works commence:

- Natural England assent if site is designated & works are not agreed within an agri-environment agreement, or if works deviate from agreement prescriptions.
- Wildlife licence application for protected species – to be determined by Ecology team through pre-works site assessment and survey.

Risk Assessment

Hazard	Initial Risk			Controls / Safeguards / Precautions	Revised Risk		
	S	L	R		S	L	R
Disturbance / injury / killing of Water voles e.g. crushing by heavy machinery.	4	5	C	Methodology designed not to impact water voles or NE licence obtained for the works.	1	1	A
Damage or destruction of burrows by machinery / sediment / construction activities.	4	5	C	Excavator to work 3m from bank edge where burrows located.	1	1	A

Matrix

		LIKELIHOOD					RISK
		Very unlikely	Unlikely	Moderately likely	Likely	Very likely	
SEVERITY		1	2	3	4	5	
Low (minimal, short-term disturbance levels and negligible damage to native habitats.)	1	A	A	A	A	A	A OK. Work to provisions in risk assessment
Medium (moderate, short-term disturbance levels, some damage to native habitats/species. Regenerates quickly.)	2	A	A	A	B	B	B Proceed with caution. Dynamically review risks.
High (high disturbance levels over a longer period and displacement of species. Damage to native habitats. Significant time to regenerate)	3	A	B	B	C	C	C Cancel task. Approach project in a different way.
Very High (Long-term disturbance with displacement/death of species. Significant damage to native habitats that takes a significant time to regenerate.)	4	B	B	C	C	C	