

Section C - Appendices – Useful Information

A1. What's not a water vole?!

Whilst out in the field there may be a number of field signs that you come across that you may get confused with water vole signs. The following should be disregarded.

- **Any broken sections of dead vegetation.**

Often you will find pieces of dead plant, particularly rushes, washed up on the bank side. The broken pieces can often look about water vole size. Old vegetation might have been cut by a water vole but the fact that it is old might mean that water voles are no longer there.

Only green vegetation should be used as a sign of water vole presence.

- **Vegetation chewed by cattle**

Check around to see if the area is grazed or might have been grazed. Cattle, sheep, deer and horses often nibble vegetation and cut pieces off just above ground height, so you might think it was cut by a water vole. If there are hoof prints, stock etc. around then be aware of this when you're surveying.

Trampled banks are generally not good for water voles as stock can crush their burrows

- **Pieces of vegetation 'felled like trees'**

Quite often you will find pieces of vegetation that have been chopped down at the base and left lying. These might be cut by water voles but quite often they are cut by field voles and then chewed into smaller bits afterwards.

Field vole vegetation will be cut at about 2-5cm long

- **Field vole burrows**

Field vole burrows are usually no more than 2 fingers in size, whereas you can usually fit 3-4 fingers into a water vole burrow.

- **Faeces like chocolate vermicelli!!**

Field vole droppings will tend to look like hundreds and thousands – water vole is much bigger, although some young may leave small droppings.

A2. Environmental etiquette!

When out looking for water vole and their signs please adhere to the following:

1. Please do not remove field signs

If you find water vole food piles then leave them where you find them – they might be a vital food supply for the voles. Latrines might be important territorial and breeding markers.

2. Always clean your equipment (particularly boots) between every site visit

There are a number of invasive, non-native plants, which produce seeds and roots which are easily spread to other areas in tiny fragments and which cause havoc with our native wetlands. There is also a disease of the rare native crayfish that can be spread from non-native crayfish by contact with water.

3. Access

If you are undertaking surveys on any public footpath (shown on OS maps and usually signposted) then it is not necessary to obtain permission from a landowner, although it is courteous to explain what you are doing and make sure landowners are not opposed.

Any other land is likely to be private. Please do not enter onto private land without the landowner's permission. Remember – the Manhood Wildlife and Heritage Group relies on maintaining good relations with landowners to achieve conservation works.

If you are planning to survey on private land then please seek permission from the landowner beforehand. Details can often be found by asking at the nearest farmhouse, local shop or pub etc.

If you are unable to contact the landowner, then do not trespass. If you are refused access permission then please respect the decision of the landowner.

4. Advice and information

Please try not to discuss, or give advice on, habitat management or other otter and water vole related issues – it can result in a misunderstanding of the purpose of your visit, and the giving of inappropriate/non-standardised advice.

5. Nesting birds

Please don't forget to keep watch for nesting birds and other wildlife whilst surveying in and around water. If you see a nesting bird or a nest with eggs in it, please move away and keep your distance. Water vole surveys necessitate a certain amount of disturbance of reed beds etc. and so should be avoided around wetland areas during the bird breeding season. A good time to survey is March for presence and absence of water voles, and then in September/October to see how far water voles have dispersed after the breeding season.

A3. Health and Safety

Rivers and wetlands present a number of hazards, and great care should be taken when surveying in the field.

The following is a simple guide to your own safety when surveying. Please do not be daunted by it! It is important that you are aware of all potential hazards.

NOTE: Please take full responsibility for your own safety and for that of any children with you whilst surveying. You are only insured as a volunteer if you are registered with the MWHG or Sussex Wildlife Trust and have completed their volunteer forms.

1. Safety first

When out in the field, never try and reach parts of a site if you consider it to be dangerous or precarious in any way – i.e. do not attempt to cross a river if you cannot see the bottom; be aware that wet mud can be very deep and difficult to get out of; be aware that many river banks are steep and can be difficult to climb if crumbly or sparsely vegetated. *This is particularly valid if you are working alone.*

2. Lone Working

Try to go looking for signs with other people. We do not recommend you work alone. If you do need to go out alone, then make sure that you tell immediate friends and family or a local landowner exactly where you are going (including grid reference), details of the vehicle you are travelling in and where it will be left, how long you will be and when you will get back. If necessary phone home to change arrangements if you have a change of plan. *Never put yourself in to a situation where you think you may be in danger.*

3. Be prepared

An age-old saying, but it works! Before you leave, make sure you have any safety equipment that you need and that you are dressed appropriately. Take note of weather conditions both locally and regionally. Heavy rainfall many miles upstream can cause localised and flash flooding, causing some rivers to rise several feet in a matter of minutes. *Do not go out surveying if weather conditions are bad, and particularly if rainfall has been heavy in the last day or so. Surveying following this weather is often of little use anyway as rain-washes away any useful signs.*

4. Learn to swim

We would not recommend that anyone who cannot swim should undertake surveying near watercourses. If you must survey and you cannot swim, then a self-inflating life jacket must be worn. Even those who can swim should wear a lifejacket if possible.

General Rules of Health and Safety

- Always make sure you wear suitable clothing and footwear
- Take a first aid kit with you and have first aid training
- Make sure you are up to date with tetanus jabs, and make your doctor aware that you are working around rivers
- Stop your search before daylight begins to fade

- Clean and cover any cuts with waterproof dressings.
- Always clean your hands with sterile water before eating; if necessary use sterile wipes.
- Always tell someone where you are going and for how long
- Be aware of local hazards such as poisonous plants, pollution signs etc.
- Try and walk upstream when searching for signs, so that you can watch for rising water levels.

General hazards

River areas are often hazardous but there are some things to particularly watch out for:

- Holes such as badger and rabbit holes hidden under vegetation
- Barbed wire, litter and fencing etc. hidden in vegetation
- Soft, steep or crumbly river banks and soft muddy areas
- Beware of logs and wooden debris, they can be rotten. Some bankside trees can be unstable and may come loose if used as hand holds.

Specific hazards

1. Giant Hogweed



This plant is highly toxic. It produces large amounts of sap and has hairs on the stem and leaves that cause a severe allergic reaction (swelling, blistering and irritation), which is made worse by exposure to sunlight. The plant is enormous (growing up to 5m tall) with large clusters of white flower heads

2. Hemlock water dropwort



Another highly toxic plant with poisonous sap. If ingested in sufficient quantities this plant will kill you. Symptoms include vomiting and severe stomach cramps. The sap also causes blistering.

Consult a flower book so that you can identify these plants. Wear clothing that covers your arms and legs and do not touch any plants you do not recognise.

3. **Weil's disease**

Weil's disease is caused by a bacterial organism carried in the kidneys of rodents, which is passed out into water by their urine. A second form of the disease is passed from cattle to humans.

The main routes of infections are through cuts and grazes, and through the nose, eyes and mouth. Early symptoms can be confused with flu i.e. pains in joints and muscles, elevated temperature, headache. Later symptoms include bruising of the skin, sore eyes, nosebleeds and jaundice.

If you suspect Weil's disease tell your doctor immediately. The disease can be fatal.

4. **Exposure, hypothermia, sunstroke, exhaustion, hunger**

Make sure that you are equipped with the appropriate clothing, footwear, food and drink for your individual needs on any given day. Cut your survey short if you feel ill in any way.

5. **Livestock and wildlife**

Livestock can be very inquisitive. They are unlikely to be aggressive, however bulls and mothers with calves may be. Any injured animal or animal with young can be dangerous if approached. If looking for signs of otters in holes in tree roots, be aware that they may also be occupied by mink. Both otters and mink may attack any face or hand placed into these areas, particularly if they contain young!

6. **Blue - Green algae**

Certain forms of blue green algae can be toxic to humans. If you are unsure of the algae in a watercourse then do not put yourself in contact with it. Always wash your hands after contact with water

7. **Safety in the water**

- Only go into or cross water if there is a good reason to do so. If you do wish to investigate something that is only accessible by entering the water then make sure you are with another adult, who is watching you from a safe vantage point and is prepared with a rope or branch to help you if you get into difficulty. Give them any first aid kit, mobile phone or other equipment.
- Only go in to just under your knees. Never use chest waders – if you fall in they can fill with air and tip you upside down in the water.
- Never go in barefoot – there may be unseen hazards underwater.
- Use a strong stick to help you keep your balance and to help pull you up steep banks. The stick can be used to check water depth and the condition of the riverbed before every step you take.
- Place each footstep carefully and firmly.
- Walk upstream – this keep the water clear so you can see where you are stepping.
- Beware of pools – they can be very deep. They are often found under trees, at the end of riffles and in the outside bend of meanders.
- Beware of slippery rocks, particularly if they are covered in green or brown moss or algae.
- Do not enter the water anywhere that you can see white water (rapids).
- Do not cross or enter the water near weirs, dams or waterfalls.

**At the end of the day, we value your safety more than we value the survey information.
Please do not take unnecessary risks.**

We love water voles and we hope that you do too!



Thanks

Thanks to Terry Whittaker who gave us kind permission to use his photos in our work to promote the conservation of the water vole

**PDF of the
Water Vole Information and Education Pack**

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