Mink Control
Best Practice For Wildlife Conservation

Background

Since its establishment in the wild in the 1950’s (following escapes from fur farms), the non-native American Mink (*Neovison vison*) has become widely established throughout the UK. Mink have had a major impact on our native fauna through the predation of birds including vulnerable species such as kingfisher. In particular they have had a major impact on the native water vole (*Arvicola amphibious*) (Strachan, Strachan & Jefferies, 2000).

The pressure of mink predation on top of existing habitat degradation has contributed to over a 90% decline in water voles in Sussex. Against this background, it has been accepted by The Wildlife Trusts (along with other conservation bodies) that mink control is an essential tool to help conserve the remaining key populations of water vole. Mink control must however be appropriately targeted, legal, humane, and must form part of a wider water vole conservation strategy (to include appropriate habitat management and restoration, ongoing monitoring etc). Encouraging the native otter to return through can also be an effective way of reducing mink numbers on watercourses and lakes.

This leaflet aims to provide you with the knowledge you need to control mink in the most effective and least labour intensive way possible. Mink control is not always necessary or possible, although often it is desirable. There are situations (where habitat is of extremely high quality or other prey such as rabbits are abundant) where water voles and mink can co-exist, but these are rare.

Is it a mink or an otter?

Before carrying out mink control, make absolutely sure that you have not mistaken otters for mink. Otters are a protected native species and do not present any threat to water voles. See Sussex Wildlife Trust’s website (wetlands) for more details.

Otters are up to twice as big as mink, otters tend to be nocturnal (mink are more likely to be active during the day), otters are less likely to be seen in family groups (particularly in Sussex), and otters have a distinctive chocolate brown colouring with a clearly visible creamy colour chin/chest patch (compared to mink which are generally a blacker brown and more obviously furry). If you are unsure if it is an otter or a mink then ask for advice from your local Wildlife Trust.
Legal protection of the Otter

Otters have not bred in Sussex since the 1970’s and are fully protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, Schedule 5. It is a legal offence to intentionally or recklessly kill, injure or knowingly disturb an Otter, damage or obstruct an Otter holt. Otters are also protected by European law under Annex II and IV of the EC Habitats Directive.

Biology of the American Mink

Before controlling mink it is useful to know their biology and habits so that you can take steps to control them effectively. Male mink begin to roam around looking for females to mate with between January and March. By February/March, females have often been mated and will be carrying up to ten young. By late spring, females are likely to have dependent young established in a chosen den. If the mother dies then the young will starve. This is a welfare issue which should be considered when controlling mink. During summer, mink are often found in family groups which are frequently active during the day.

Mink are territorial and once young have matured, they will generally be forced out of the natal den to find their own territory. This usually occurs between July and November (peak time August-September). Mink mark their territories with distinctive scats (in a similar way to otters). This, along with footprints, can be a good way to establish mink presence (see Tracks on the River bank Leaflet). A mink will generally occupy a territory of between 1 and 6km of river and associated dry land.

Mink are opportunistic feeders and carnivores. They take a wide variety of prey including birds (ducks, cygnets, moorhen etc,) water voles, rabbits, and a variety of small mammals. Mink are also curious and will instinctively investigate unusual holes, tunnels or objects.

Otter spraints (dung of an otter) have a distinct aroma. It can smell like freshly mown hay or putrefied fish. Spraints contain fish scales and small frog bones

Mink scat containing mammal hair and mammal bones with distinctive (unpleasant) musky smell

Otter footprint (above), can’t be covered with a £2 coin © D Barker

Mink footprint (right), can be covered with £2 coin
Potential types of mink control

There are a number of possible methods of mink control, however many are ineffective and some are illegal.

Hunting with Hounds
This method is both resource and labour intensive and is also disruptive of riparian wildlife such as nesting birds and otters. Under the Government’s Hunting Bill (Clause 45(1)(d)) 2002, hunting mink with dogs is a legal offence unless the hunting is registered or exempt.

Drowning
Some people may recommend drowning mink. However, this method is illegal, and for a semi-aquatic mammal is one of the most cruel ways to kill the animal.

Trapping
Trapping is the legally acceptable and most effective way of controlling mink. Two kinds of trap are allowed by law – live capture traps (cage traps) and spring traps (killing traps). Cage traps are recommended as they are less indiscriminate than killing traps and they reduce the deaths of non target species. If using mink traps, all traps should be fitted with otter guards (see below left for details).

Trapping in combination with use of mink rafts
This is the most effective and least labour intensive way of trapping mink. See below for more details.

Best practice guidelines for mink control

Method of Control
Live trapping (with subsequent shooting) is the most appropriate means of controlling mink. This method also allows for the release of non-target species (particularly those of conservation concern - e.g. otter).

Types of trap
It is recommended that purpose-built live capture cage traps are purchased – these are widely available from agricultural suppliers i.e. www.albionmanufacturing.com or www.alanaecology.com
Trap should be heavy duty, galvanised welded mesh traps (175mm x 600mm x 150mm) with single catch, single entry and spring door trap. (Approx. £40 each - 2011). All traps must be fitted with an ‘otter exclusion guard’ to avoid inadvertent capture of young otters. Using traps in conjunction with mink rafts ensures maximum efficiency and mink capture rates.
Guidelines for Mink Trapping

Locating the trap (when not using a mink raft)

Set traps where mink are most likely to encounter them;
- Confluences of watercourses; inlets/outlets for ponds and lakes; where drains, hedges or fence lines meet watercourses
- On or near notable bankside features such as weirs, willow pollards, fallen logs or bridges
- On islands, including artificial rafts, in or near culverts and so on.
- Avoid placing traps in the open, particularly beside public footpaths (to avoid theft, vandalism, disturbance by dogs and distress to trapped animals).
- Avoid placing traps where they can be knocked or interfered with by cattle, badgers etc
- Do not set traps in entrances to known otter holts – this is illegal.

When to trap

- Between January and March to remove any potential breeding population.
- From late August to early November to catch dispersing animals.
- Short periods of trapping (5 to 10 days at a time) can be as effective as continual trapping.
- Once trapping is started, it must be maintained. Mink will continually re-colonise un-occupied areas.
- Do not trap in extreme weather i.e. snow, frost, gales, torrential rain or storms as this can cause undue distress to animals and mortality of trapped species (which may not always be mink).

Setting the trap

Mink are curious. Creating a dark and interesting hole will encourage mink to investigate, and ensure any stress suffered by the animal is minimised.
- Ensure trap is above potential rises in water level (trash lines often indicate flood levels).
- Make sure the trap is set on even ground so that movement of a trapped animal cannot knock the trap into water or onto its side. Pegging down traps with simple metal pegs is recommended.
- Traps can be partially dug into the ground if you require extra stability. An unstable trap will deter mink from entering.
- Cover traps in dry grass/hay – any creature caught can pull this through the mesh to make a bed. Alternatively wedge the trap between logs, or heap it over with sticks, driftwood, stones or similar (ensuring these do not interfere with the operation of the trap).
- The provision of bait (e.g. fish-flavoured cat food, fish) can increase the attraction for mink, but mink prefer their prey alive or fresh. Baiting of well-located traps is often not necessary, as mink are intensely curious, and bait can even deter animals from entering.
Checking the trap

Once the trap is set it must be checked daily – this is a legal requirement.

- Ideally traps should be checked twice a day to release any animals which were not a target.
- The best time of day to check traps is early morning (mink, and many other waterside animals are most active at night). Removing animals in the morning ensures that they suffer the least exposure to light and heat during the day.
- If it is not possible to check traps on a particular day, ensure that the entrance is pegged open on the preceding day (rather than removing the trap).
- Some landowners install a small flag device which triggers when the trap is activated. This can be a visual aid to show when traps are occupied.
- Non-target species (e.g. otter, water vole, birds etc) should be released immediately.
- Consideration must be given as to how other pest species are dealt with (e.g. brown rats) if caught.
- Once a mink has been caught, it is illegal to release it back into the wild, or keep it captive without a licence.

Dispatching mink

The only acceptable way to dispatch captured mink is a clean shot through the head. Please refer to the BASC best practice document for guidance. Many firearms require a firearm certificate before they can be used but the following are recommended:-

- A Benjamin Train NP or Webley Typhoon .177 pistol is ample to dispatch a mink humanely (recommended by the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust)
- A 0.22 calibre rimfire rifle (powerful air gun or shotgun) can also be used if you are licenced, but these may be dangerous and cause ricochets if fired into a cage.
- Bullets with re-enforced tips are also recommended (subsonic hollow points or light steel tipped bullets)
- To make shooting easier, use a wooden “comb” to corner the animal in one end of the cage.
- The body should be buried in an appropriate location, unless frozen for research purposes.

Is there anyone who can control your mink for you?

The trapping and dispatch of mink involves licensed activities such as shooting and it is therefore not a method that many people are able to employ. There may be occasions where it is possible to ask others to control mink for you. There are a few locations in Sussex (the Chichester Coastal Plain in particular) where part time mink control officers are employed to control mink.

If you have problems with mink in your house or garden, then your local pest control department based within District and Borough Councils will have designated pest control experts they can deploy to catch your mink. Private pest control services such as Rentokil can also be employed to dispatch mink (although this may have a cost). Local gamekeepers or members of national shooting organisations such as the BASC may also be licensed to dispatch mink.
**Trapping using Mink rafts**

Although trapping for mink can be effective on its own, it is much more effective and less time consuming to use mink rafts. A mink raft is a floating raft which uses a wetted clay pad to monitor the presence of mink (and other animal) footprints.

Once mink have investigated the raft and have left scat or footprints, a trap can be placed under the wooden housing. Mink will generally be trapped within a few days. Mink rafts can then be moved to other locations to monitor whether mink are present. See www.gwct.org.uk (mink rafts) for mink raft designs and mink raft science and research.

**Mink rafts - rules of thumb**

- One raft per 1km of river is recommended
- Placing at strategic river intersections can help. Mink are territorial and will defend good territory with regular visits and scent marking.
- Rafts should be securely attached to banks and able to respond to changes in water levels
- Where possible, rafts should be covered with vegetation to make them less conspicuous and less open to weather extremes and heat.
- Rafts without traps can be monitored at irregular intervals (at least once a week)
- Once traps have been added to rafts they should be checked at least daily
- Site your raft away from public footpaths to avoid potential injury to the public, dogs and trapped animals and to avoid distress to passers by.
- Do not put rafts or traps out if there is a risk of high flows or extreme weather.
- Return rafts to monitoring mode after each capture or after a period of ten days without capture
- Rafts last up to 4 years (if marine ply is used) and can be deployed when needed
- Rafts are useful for monitoring the presence of other species such as otter and water vole
- In high flow conditions, consider temporarily removing the raft if there is a risk that it will be torn away in floods, or that accessing it to check traps might become impractical

Occasionally you might identify mink traps on the clay pad but not be able to catch a mink.

This might be because:

1) The mink has already died
2) The mink visiting the raft was transient and has moved on
3) The location of the raft is suffering from too much disturbance
Do I need consent to put mink rafts on watercourses?

On designated main rivers under Environment Agency control, yes. Under the Water Resources Act 1991 the Environment Agency must be consulted regarding any structure or works that are in, over or under a main river. For the purpose of consenting, mink rafts are classed as the same as a pontoon/fishing platform etc. Mink rafts can potentially cause problems with flooding or erosion, so where it may be appropriate to put a raft in one watercourse, it may not be appropriate to put one in another. EA consent may be issued with conditions and the fee may sometimes be waived! You may be required to provide regular i.e. 3 yearly updates on mink raft locations.

Note: In some situations, traps or rafts may be available on loan from the Environment Agency or your local Wildlife Trust.

Record Keeping
Monitoring the results of mink trapping and sharing the results is extremely useful. It provides information on mink populations, the effectiveness of the trapping programme and (in conjunction with other survey data) its impact on the water vole population. All records can be sent to the Sussex Biodiversity Record Centre using the I record programme freely available on the web [http://www.brc.ac.uk/irecord/](http://www.brc.ac.uk/irecord/) or its equivalent phone app.

Recommended Gun Use
Please refer to BASC best practice guidance

**With Firearms certificate**

A .22 rimfire rifle, using subsonic hollow point ammunition with minimal risk of ricochets. The rimfire has at least ten times the muzzle energy of the airgun pellet.

**With No Firearms certificate**

**Bullets**

A lighter pellet achieves a higher velocity. A steel pellet does not deform when it strikes bone, and penetrates easily through the skull.

**Air rifles (less than 12 foot pounds) or Shotguns (.177 pistol)**

Air rifles or shotguns are humane options, but both are less discrete and introduce more serious safety issues. An air rifle is more unwieldy than an air pistol, and can be over-powered for the job. Beware of bullets going through the mink and ricocheting off the trap. With a shotgun, it’s important to set the trap containing the mink against a safe background and get any bystanders behind the gun. Shoot from 10 metres for safety and to avoid damaging the trap.

**Air Pistol**

A Webley Typhoon .177 or air pistol of at least 4.2 Joules nominal muzzle velocity is recommended by the GWCT. Webley typhoons are now hard to find so an alternative is a Benjamin Train NP with Prometheus steel tipped conical pellets. The air pistol generates a higher energy per unit area at the muzzle, because the smaller pellet is easier to accelerate. Use only Prometheus pointed steel pellets.
Mink Control, along with wetland habitat restoration can help to prevent further decline of the rare water vole.