Establishing an American mink trapping network in Norfolk

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American mink
Mustela Vison

Species Profile:
- **Origin:** North America
- **UK Distribution:** Widespread, except Northern Scotland
- **Habitat:** Aquatic environments, along watercourses
- **Reproduction:** Breeding takes place between late February and early April producing an average of 5.8 young per litter.

Introduced into Europe as part of the fur trade with over 3500 farms across Europe.

The species is now widely naturalised present in over 28 European countries.

Photo Credit: Peter Trimming
Impact: European Mink

Widespread across Europe until the 9th century

Range and population has been in decline since, leaving population isolated and threatened

Competes with American mink for food leading to inter-specific aggression
Impact: Ground-nesting Birds

Black-headed gulls declined by 52% and the common tern declined by 37% on West coast of Scotland

Ferreras & Macdonald (1999)
Presence of mink had a significant affect on:
• Density of breeding coots and number of chicks hatched per pair of coots
• Average number of nests per pair of moorhens and percentage of moorhen clutches hatched

American mink and the European water vole

In 1990, populations had been lost from 75% of sites occupied in 1939.

In 1998, populations had been lost from a further 67.5% of occupied sites.

A total population decline of 88% in Great Britain alone
American mink and Norfolk

The distribution of European water vole across Norfolk from 1997-2005.

Photo Credit: Norfolk Biodiversity Partnership

American mink and Norfolk

The distribution of European water vole across Norfolk from 1997-2005.

Photo Credit: Norfolk Biodiversity Partnership

The Norfolk Mink Project

- Began 10 years ago, with control focussed on the River Wensum SAC.
- Emphasis was put on ‘water vole conservation’ rather than ‘mink control’.
The Norfolk Mink Project

- Came out of the Water vole Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP), which identified the control of American mink as a key priority to halt the decline of vole populations in Norfolk.

River Wensum SAC
The Norfolk Mink Project

- The project aimed to establish a self-sustaining network of volunteers, who would monitor the mink population and trap them as required.
- Many large Estates on the river were already trapping mink, due to their impact on wildlife and **game bird numbers**.

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**Mink Trapping**

*Photo Credit: GWCT*
Mink Trapping

This method of mink control has a number of benefits:

- Scaled-down Trapping
- Increased Efficiency
- Feedback and Motivation
- Reduced capture of non-target species

Photo Credit: GWCT

Reducing the Impact of Non-native Species in Europe
www.rinse-europe.eu

"Investing in your future"
Crossborder cooperation programme 2007-2013 Part-financed by the European Union (European Regional Development Fund)
How effective has the project been?

Annual Wensum Mink Kill
How effective has the project been?

Total Wensum Control Area Mink Kill by Month

Length of Main River = 78 km
Area of Catchment = 650 km²
Number of rafts deployed = 75*
Active rafts = 46*
On average one active raft per 1.7 km of river*.

* = in 4th quarter of 2012

Expansion

- With the obvious success of the mink control project on the Wensum, a similar project was launched in the Broads.
Expansion

• With a project on the River Waveney following shortly after…

The Norfolk Mink Control Strategy

• Between 2003 and 2010 the project was managed by three different organisations.
• No overarching strategy or aim for the project.
• Expansion was piecemeal as funding became available.
The Norfolk Mink Control Strategy

- The Norfolk Non-native Species Initiative (part of Norfolk County Council) took over management of the mink projects in 2011.
- Simon Baker was made Chair of the Mink Projects’ Steering Group in 2011.

The Norfolk Mink Control Strategy

- Simon was commissioned by the NNNSI to produce a new Strategy for the control of American mink.
- A Strategy for the whole of Norfolk with a realistic aim:
  - Reduce mink density to extremely low levels throughout the county, with localised eradication where possible.
The Norfolk Mink Control Strategy

- The Strategy sets out how we envisage the Project working for the next 7 years, to 2020.
- A more dynamic approach, with more feedback for the trappers.
- Better methods of data collection and storage are essential.
The Norfolk Mink

Control Strategy

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The Norfolk Mink Control Strategy

North Norfolk

Holkham Hall (Credit: Paul C)

Sandringham House (Credit: Ray Sullivan)
Progress to date

• A local contractor was taken on as the Catchment Co-ordinator in January 2013.
• He identified 3 distinct groups of potential volunteers:
  – Game Keepers, Fishery staff and the landowners who employ them.
  – Conservation sector staff.
  – Conservation enthusiasts.
Progress to date

- 15-20 volunteers are involved with the project so far (we aim for 40 by the end of the project).
- The local community is supportive – no opposition at all!
- Although Game Keepers perceive the threat from mink to be low, they are still keen to participate.

Challenges

- All volunteers perceive the number of mink to be low – is this true or just because people haven’t been looking?
- One major NGO are hesitant about becoming involved due to potential adverse publicity and conflict. Currently consulting Research Team.
Challenges

• Strong interest from fishermen – although in Norfolk otters are increasingly thought to be more problematic than mink (!?)

Lessons learnt…

• The volunteer trappers respond well to direct personal contact or phone. If you e-mail them forms asking for information you won’t get anything back!
• The rafts don’t work well in small rivers… perhaps use tunnels on the bank side, as has been done in the Scottish Highlands?
• Norfolk wide co-ordination is welcome.
Future plans

• Develop a new ‘Cloud’ based Database:
  – Standardised methods to collect and store data are essential.
  – We have to get the right information from the trappers, via the Catchment Co-ordinators
    • For example, we have good records of mink captures, but without trapping effort these are not very useful!

Future plans

• Fill in the gaps in our current coverage:
Future plans

- Maintain regular contact with the trappers, update on progress of project across Norfolk.
- Use regular contact to build a more dynamic trapping approach.
- Try to find a longer term funding solution!

Conclusions

- Volunteers can be used to control invasive mammals if given proper training and provided with ongoing support.
- Although we can’t eradicate mink, we can reduce it to such low numbers that it is no longer a problem.
- Although the management of land in the UK is very different to Flanders, is there potential to try to emulate certain aspects of this approach here?
References:


Reynolds, J (2007) The GWCT Mink Raft - V.2.2