

GLASGOW CITY COUNCIL LAND AND ENVIRONMENTAL SERVICES

Conservation Factsheet No 4: WATER VOLES AND GRASSLAND MANAGEMENT

Water Voles and Grassland Management

Water Voles

Traditionally water voles live in and around water. However, a unique population has recently been found living in urban grassland in the East End of Glasgow. Water voles are a nationally declining species and are legally protected. In Glasgow, water voles are also a Local Biodiversity Action Plan priority species and it is the Council's duty to protect and enhance their population.

Initial surveys of this new unusual population have indicated that water voles have adapted well to this new environment and they are present in numbers not observed in any other urban UK environment. Furthermore Water voles are now scarce or absent over most of lowland Scotland, making this population particularly relevant to biodiversity conservation.

Grassland Management

This population of water voles lives mainly in areas of long grass. They are herbivores and have a diet of leaves and seeds. They burrow into the ground and have a network of tunnels where they breed and sleep. The long grass gives them cover from predators to come above ground to feed on vegetation.

Currently it is illegal to disturb water voles at their place of rest and a licence is required to carry out management, so the Council is leaving the grass long. Further research is being carried out on this unique population to determine the optimum habitat requirements and discussions are being held with Scottish Natural Heritage to determine the best long term habitat management practices. Additional surveys are being carried out to identify the full extent of the population.

Water Voles in Gardens

If you happen to live in the east of Glasgow then there is a possibility that water voles live in areas of long grass near you. If you do not want them in your garden it is recommended to keep the grass in your garden mown short to discourage water voles from moving in. If however you are happy to share your garden with water voles then leave some grass to grow. Ideally this area would be at the back of your garden in an undisturbed area, so that you can still enjoy using the garden yourself.

For residential private gardens Scottish Natural Heritage allow grass cutting without a licence and recommend that if the grass has become long and water voles are present the area is brought back in to management in sections and an area of long grass habitat (measuring approx. 5m²) is retained at the rear of the property.

Remember any areas of long grass can be enhanced by planting wildflowers to make it look more colourful and benefit other wildlife such as butterflies and other pollinating insects.

Water Vole Legislation

Since 1998 the Water Vole has received legal protection through its inclusion on Schedule 5 of the Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981 (as amended), in respect of Section 9(4) only.

Recently the Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004 enhanced this protection by inclusion of the term 'recklessly' in the offences quoted below. Furthermore, the current partial protection afforded to this species is under wider review and is likely to be extended in future. At present it is an offence to intentionally or recklessly:

- Damage, destroy or obstruct access to any structure or place which water voles use for shelter or protection, and;
- Disturb water voles while they are using such a place.