

Grassland Water Voles in Gardens- Guidance



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Water Voles

Traditionally water voles live in and around water. However, a unique population has recently been found living in urban grassland in the North East of Glasgow. Initial surveys of this unusual population have indicated that water voles have adapted well to this new environment and they are present in numbers rarely observed elsewhere in Britain.

This population of water voles lives primarily in areas of long grass. They mainly eat grass roots, leaves and seeds. They burrow into the ground like moles and have a similar network of tunnels where they breed and sleep. The long grass gives them cover from predators to come above ground to feed on vegetation. The voles do not tend to move far from the safety of their burrow entrance, in fact they spend most of their time underground.

Water voles across Britain are in decline (due to loss of habitat and predation by introduced American mink). The grassland population in the North East of Glasgow is of national significance due to the large population that lives there and their unusual lifestyle, away from water. Because water voles are a nationally declining species they also receive some legal protection (more detail on the protection they have can be found at the end of this note).

To find out more about Glasgow's remarkable water vole population you can watch a short film about the voles (under the projects & news section) and find an information leaflet on the following webpage: <https://www.glasgow.gov.uk/watervoles>.

Water voles in residential gardens

A number of people living in the North East of Glasgow have reported water voles living in their gardens, and while some people are happy to accept them, others are a bit unsure.

The problem with removing water voles from gardens is that others may replace them from the surrounding environment, as the garden is providing desirable habitat for them. The voles will spend most of their time underground and retreat into their burrows when you are in the garden.

We would be delighted if you could help with the conservation effort by continuing to allow water voles to use your garden, or part of it, if they have moved in, but we accept that may not always be suitable, so this information sheet offers some further advice on garden management.

Garden management for those happy to have water voles in their garden

If you are happy to share your garden with water voles then we recommend that you leave some of your grass to grow long. 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. An area of long grass habitat (measuring, if possible, at least 5m²) should be retained. By mowing carefully in sections, leaving a week or so between cutting the next section, and starting at the furthest point from where you wish to retain water vole habitat, you may be able to guide water voles to their garden refuge.

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 which are declining across the UK too.



An example of colourful wildflower planting

Garden management for those who do not want water voles in their garden

Lawn management

If you do not want water voles in your garden we recommend you keep the grass cut very short to deter them from moving in.

A vole may still burrow into the garden, but could quickly move into better habitat, e.g. long grass elsewhere, so if the grass is kept short the vole may move away of its own accord - just be careful not to collapse any active burrows while cutting the grass.

For gardens where the grass has become long and water voles are present, the area may be brought back under control carefully. Burrows can be identified and the lawn mown in sections, leaving a week or so between cutting the next section, taking care to not damage the burrows. This should allow the water voles to vacate the burrows and move into an area of more suitable habitat.

Water voles under decking or sheds

Water voles can set up home in some unusual places. We have had reports of water voles living under Portakabins; under wooden panelling, which has been left on the ground for a few weeks; and under garden decking. Water voles can burrow under decking or sheds, using the underside as a protective roof for their burrow systems; they are unlikely to chew through the wooden material.

If you find that this has happened in your garden and you do not want the voles there, you will need to use a non-lethal trap to catch the voles and release them somewhere suitable, which has long vegetation cover and soil that the animals can burrow into. As the safe, live capture of wild animals is not recommended by non-professionals, an ecologist should be employed to do this as they will have the equipment and experience of trapping and relocating water voles (the CIEEM website has a [directory](#) of ecologists that are qualified to assist with this work). Trapping should be done when the animals are not breeding, it is not good practice to relocate a mother while she has dependent young or separate her from them (so trapping should be carried out ideally in Spring, between 1st March – 15th April, before water voles have started to breed, or as a last resort in October, after they have stopped breeding and before the colder winter months start).

Please note that the most successful method of trapping grassland water voles is by digging the live trap into the ground at the burrow entrance, but this requires a licence from Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH). Any subsequent destruction or damage to the burrow, after the vole has been trapped and removed should also be covered by the licence.

After voles have been trapped and released somewhere suitable, we recommend you deter other voles from moving or burrowing under the decking, or shed, by inserting wooden panelling below ground (e.g. sheets of marine plywood, at least 2cm thick and buried to at least 70cm), at the edge of the decking, or shed, to stop voles from digging underneath. Another option could be to create a border around the decking, or shed, with gravel or paving stones, which may deter the vole from digging under it.

For further information about trapping and releasing water voles and the use of marine plywood as a barrier, please refer to the [Water Vole Mitigation Handbook](#), 2016.



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Pets

Please try to discourage your dogs from digging out water vole burrows.

Cats will try to catch water voles that have emerged from their burrows. If you own a cat that goes outdoors, we would be grateful if you could put a collar with a bell on, around its neck, to help reduce the chance of your cat killing or harming wildlife.

Water Vole Legislation

Water voles are protected by the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended). This protection is currently restricted to a water vole's place of shelter. However, it should be noted that full protection to cover the animal is proposed.

It is an offence to intentionally or recklessly:

- damage, destroy or obstruct access to a water vole burrow or place of shelter;
- disturb a water vole while it is using its burrow or place of shelter.

If you have any queries or concerns about carrying out works around water voles, legislation or licensing then you can contact SNH Licensing Team on 01463 725 364 or licensing@nature.scot. Further information relating to water voles and licensing can also be found [here](#).

If you would like further information about water voles, please contact Scottish Natural Heritage at Strathclyde_Ayrshire@nature.scot or Glasgow City Council at lesbiodiversity@glasgow.gov.uk.

This advice has been produced by the Glasgow Water Vole Project:

