

A raft of ideas to help track down the elusive water vole

The experts created some artificial rafts which they floated on watercourses near the road, and helped identify several populations of the protected animals.

Water voles are the UK's most rapidly declining mammal and have disappeared from many places where they once thrived. River pollution, habitat loss and the spread of the invasive mink are all said to have led to falling numbers of voles.

But they are very elusive and it can be difficult to spot burrows/feeding signs/latrines amongst the waterside vegetation.

As part of Highways England's planned improvement scheme for the A5 between Dodwells and Longshoot at Hinckley in Leicestershire, an accurate ecological survey was needed.

These reports are key to the planning of any scheme. Highways England is committed to operating and improving the road network in a way that protects the local environment and works more harmoniously with its surroundings.

So experts were dispatched to carry out surveys in the area – including whether there were any water voles living in the local habitat.

They used an innovative ecological survey method and, between April and August last year, floated 20 polystyrene 'latrine' rafts in the watercourses. These helped identify low and medium populations of water vole in areas where the creatures had not been tracked down before.

At Wapping Brook, the team identified 23 populations when the rafts were put down – previously they have only recorded three.

Highways England Environmental Manager Gareth Wilson said:

We need accurate ecological surveys to make sure our work does not impact on the local environment and wildlife.

Knowing where the water voles are allows us to manage their habitats sympathetically and take proactive measures to make sure the species does not experience any further declines in numbers.

Artificial floating latrines are cheap and are a useful method in detecting this under-threat species, especially in more challenging locations.

Prints like this left by water voles are hard to spot.

The ecological survey was carried out by members of the East Midlands Asset Delivery (EMAD) team - made up of Highways England, Kier and 21 other partners.

The team have now been invited to highlight their innovation at the Mammal Society Spring Conference 2020 in Cambridge later between 27-29 March. The poster presentation will be entitled Raft but not Least – an Innovative Ecological Surveying Method for Detecting Water Voles.

Taking part will be James Littlemore, Amy Collier, Gareth Wilson and Richard Carline.

James, a senior ecologist for Kier, said:

Once upon a time water voles were common and widespread in the British landscape, but with significant population declines in recent years linked to habitat loss and fragmentation, pollution of rivers and streams and predation by mink they are amongst our most endangered wild mammals.

It was a pleasure to work collaboratively with Highways England to refine a survey method to detect such a secretive, protected species. We can use this approach to find out where their strongholds are so that we are better able to conserve them in and around the strategic road network.

General enquiries

Members of the public should contact the Highways England customer contact centre on 0300 123 5000.

Media enquiries

Journalists should contact the Highways England press office on 0844 693 1448 and use the menu to speak to the most appropriate press officer.

[New Sellafeld bus contract will improve service and save money](#)

The company will take over the contract on 1 April 2020.

Passengers will see current services maintained and improved. Fares, where

charged, will remain unchanged.

People employed on the current contract will be transferred to the new supplier via the TUPE process.

Efficiency improvements are forecast to save £9.3m over the lifetime of the contract.

The winning bidder was chosen following a rigorous and competitive tender process.

Its tender was scored the highest across four criteria: delivery, safety, cost, and innovation.

Steve Bostock, Sellafield Ltd site director, said:

Our commuter, shuttle, and park and ride bus services have been a huge success.

Hundreds of people are using the service, reducing the number of vehicles entering the Sellafield site and helping us deliver our mission.

Congratulations to Stagecoach on winning this contract. I look forward to working with the company to maintain and enhance our bus services.

I'd like to thank our current supplier Reays for their excellent service. I wish them continued success in the future.

Rob Jones, managing director of Stagecoach Cumbria and North Lancashire, said:

We are delighted to have been awarded the Sellafield contract. This is an exciting opportunity for us to grow our business.

We have a longstanding history in the area; our national head offices operated from Whitehaven for a number of years with Cumbrian staff instrumental in building the company.

We look forward to working with Sellafield to continue delivering excellent bus services.

Secretary of State for Northern Ireland attends St Patrick's Day events in Washington

Rt Hon Brandon Lewis, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, will travel to Washington later today where he will represent the United Kingdom Government at a number of events to mark St Patrick's Day. Mr Lewis will use his first visit to the US as Secretary of State to build key relationships with US stakeholders who share a keen interest and influence in Northern Ireland and to reinforce the UK Government's intention to implement the commitments made in the New Decade, New Approach deal which saw devolved institutions restored in Northern Ireland after three years without government.

During his three day visit, the Secretary of State will attend key events hosted by the Irish Business and Employers Confederation (IBEC), the Northern Ireland Bureau and the UK Ambassador. He will promote Northern Ireland as open for business and showcase its great investment potential, highlighting the thriving creative industries which have been instrumental in putting Northern Ireland on the world stage for creating global television productions including Game of Thrones.

Government analysis published earlier this month shows Northern Ireland's economy could grow by up to £94 million as a result of a future UK-US free trade agreement.

The US is one of Northern Ireland's largest export markets, accounting for 12.1% of all Northern Ireland's exports. 447 businesses in Northern Ireland collectively export £2,053 worth of goods to the US every minute.

Before departing for Washington, Mr Lewis said:

I am absolutely delighted to be joining the St Patrick's Day events in Washington this week. The last few years have, undoubtedly, represented a period of real challenge for Northern Ireland. The three-year absence of a devolved government represented a step in the wrong direction, but I am delighted that the Executive is back and the Good Friday Agreement institutions are up and running once again.

The Good Friday Agreement, and the power-sharing Executive and other institutions set out within it, are as important today as they were 20 years ago. As Secretary of State, my commitment to the letter and the spirit of the Agreement is absolute, and I will never apologise for saying that the only sustainable way forward for Northern Ireland is through those institutions. The New Decade, New Approach Deal sets out an ambitious vision for Northern Ireland

and I am focussed on delivering on our commitments. Of course, we cannot forget the vital contribution the US had in helping to secure that historic deal in 1998 that led to lasting peace in Northern Ireland and for its continued support for the Northern Ireland political process.

The US is already one of Northern Ireland's largest export markets and a future UK-US free trade agreement could see the economy grow by up to £94 million. That's why we have committed to ensuring that Northern Ireland's businesses and producers enjoy unfettered access to the rest of the UK and that Northern Ireland remains an integral part of the UK internal market.

And during my visit this week I will be encouraging the many businesses I meet to continue to invest in Northern Ireland and help support local businesses to grow, create jobs and promote Northern Ireland as a great place to do business.

The Secretary of State will also hold a number of meetings with key State Department and White House officials as well as senior US Representatives and Congressmen. He will also attend the White House reception, hosted by President Donald Trump, in honour of the Taoiseach Leo Varadkar and the annual 'Friends of Ireland' lunch at Capitol Hill hosted by Speaker Nancy Pelosi.

Joint Statement on the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons

On March 5, 1970, the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) entered into force. Today, 50 years later, we celebrate the immeasurable contributions this landmark treaty has made to the security and prosperity of the nations and peoples of the world. We reaffirm our commitment to the NPT in all its aspects.

The NPT has provided the essential foundation for international efforts to stem the looming threat – then and now – that nuclear weapons would proliferate across the globe. In so doing, it has served the interests of all its Parties.

We also celebrate the astonishingly diverse benefits of the peaceful uses of

the atom, whether for electricity, medicine, agriculture, or industry. We reiterate our strong support for broadening access to the benefits of nuclear energy and its applications for peaceful purpose. This boon to humanity thrives because the NPT, and the nuclear nonproliferation regime built around the Treaty, has helped provide confidence that nuclear programs are and will remain entirely peaceful.

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) plays a critical role in NPT implementation, both to promote the fullest possible cooperation on the peaceful uses of nuclear energy, and to apply safeguards and verify that nuclear programs are entirely peaceful. An IAEA comprehensive safeguards agreement together with an Additional Protocol provide credible assurances of the absence of undeclared nuclear activities and should become the universal standard for verifying the fulfillment of NPT obligations. We pledge our full and continued support to the IAEA and urge others to do the same.

We remain committed under the NPT to the pursuit of good faith negotiations on effective measures related to nuclear disarmament, and on a treaty on general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control. We support the ultimate goal of a world without nuclear weapons with undiminished security for all. By helping to ease international tensions and create conditions of stability, security and trust among nations, the NPT has made a vital contribution to nuclear disarmament. The NPT continues to help create conditions that would be essential for further progress on nuclear disarmament.

The success of the NPT was not foreordained, nor is its future success guaranteed. It depends on our concerted and sustained efforts to ensure compliance, to promote universalization, to ensure effective safeguards, and to respond to ongoing and emerging proliferation challenges, wherever they occur. Even at the height of the Cold War, our predecessors made this wise investment in our shared security and prosperity. Today, we pledge our unstinting commitment to preserving and deepening this legacy for future generations.

Wang Yi, State Councilor and Minister of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China

Jean-Yves Le Drian, Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs, French Republic

Sergey Lavrov, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Russian Federation

Dominic Raab, Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

Michael R. Pompeo, Secretary of State, United States of America

UN Human Rights Council 43: Interactive Dialogue with UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria

Thank you, Commissioners,

The UK supports the work of the Commission of Inquiry. We welcome their objective and comprehensive report, which provides a shocking reminder of why Syria remains one of the worst human rights crises in the world.

The brutal Syrian regime and Russian offensive has created the gravest humanitarian crisis of the entire Syrian war in Idlib and surrounding areas. We welcome the current ceasefire, and urge all parties to immediately ensure sustained humanitarian access to those in need.

The Commission's recent work highlighting specific incidents that implicate the regime, and Russia, in war crimes in Idlib remind us of the ongoing importance of the mandate. The resolution we will present to the Council, will request that the Commission provide a special update on the situation in Idlib at the next session.

We are also deeply concerned about the situation for civilians in areas retaken by the regime, including arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, and forced conscriptions. It is concerning that the regime is conducting itself in exactly the same brutal way which created the tensions that sparked the conflict initially.

Commissioners,

Do you have anything further to add on recent developments in Idlib, which continue to be at the forefront of our concerns?

Thank you.