

# Scottish Mink Initiative

Working with Communities to Protect Native Wildlife



Newsletter No. 7 December 2012

## K9s on Den Finding Mission

Early autumn saw the arrival of two dog handlers and their four legged colleagues in Ullapool. The Hebridean Mink Project (HMP) has been using dogs for the last few years in order to identify mink dens or any other indication of mink presence across the Outer Hebrides.

These dogs have been trained to locate mink scat, resting up areas and most importantly active dens during the summer months. This allows targeted trapping effort and so that the animals are captured before the juveniles are old enough to disperse and establish a territory of their own.

On the west coast of northern Scotland there are large areas with very little mink activity, with only infrequent sightings being reported. It was therefore decided that it would be beneficial to use the dogs to search areas of the north west Highlands where, despite trapping having been carried out in response to sightings, no animals were caught.

Terrier Kella was tasked to search areas around Cromarty, Loch Broom and Coigach. The following week Fleece, a border collie, came over to search Wester Ross, Assynt and Durness. Nothing was flagged up in the high priority areas which added to the assumption that there is probably no breeding mink population in the far north at this point in time.

Obviously there are limitations to the use of dogs, as the handlers explained. The weather plays an important part: rain dilutes the scent; wind direction

and speed affect the ability of the dog to pick up traces of mink; and covering ground only once instead of numerous times (as they do on the Outer Hebrides) also affects the work. Having said that, if there is an old den in the area the dogs should be able find it due to the concentration of scent that accumulated over the time the mink spent there.

In exchange Gunnar Scholtz, Highland Mink Control Officer, went over to Harris to assist the HMP team with trapping and monitoring. HMP use the same kind of clay based tracking tunnels as SMI do however most of HMP's tunnels are land based, as opposed to the monitoring rafts used by SMI. This is due to the weather conditions which most rafts don't survive for very long. HMP are also trialling the use of carbon

treated metal plates which record foot prints. This method works quite well in dry conditions, however needs to be refined for damper situations.

Our sincere thanks go to Mike and Dave the dog handlers and HMP for organising everything!



## The Future...

We are now approaching the last year of implementation of the Scottish Mink Initiative (SMI) and many of you may be wondering what will happen after August 2013 when the project finishes. The Rivers and Fisheries Trusts of Scotland (RAFTS) as the lead partner in the project has been working with the other partners to secure funds to continue the eradication of breeding American mink in northern Scotland. This has led to the submission of a bid to the EU Life+ fund for an ambitious project for the volunteer based control and eradication of multiple freshwater and riparian invasive non native species. The Invasive Species Action (ISA) Scotland project will commence in the last quarter of 2013 and will run for 5 years and cover approximately 60% of northern mainland Scotland. ISA Scotland builds on the experiences and achievements of SMI and will address management of selected invasive non-native aquatic and riparian plants, aquatic invertebrates as well as American mink. We hope to hear the outcome of the funding application between March and July 2013.

RAFTS

*Chris Horrill, Project Manager*

# Mink Control Officer Updates

## Highland—Gunnar Scholtz

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The last few months saw dog handlers arrive from the Hebridean Mink Project (HMP) to help locate American mink in the north Highlands - please see the front page article.



west coast. When American mink are in low density, it is notoriously difficult to trap roaming individuals and despite continued sightings and 5 trapping cycles in Coigach, the elusive animals continue to avoid capture.

It appears there is a higher than usual number of predators this year. There are a number of sightings of pine martens, stoats and owls.

Gunnar joined the survey team from the University of Aberdeen on their annual water vole survey in Assynt. A higher than usual field vole presence was recorded last year which, in connection with the mild winter we had, might explain why there appears to be more predators.



Trapping has now finished around the Durness area in the far north. This was the third rotation this year and after more than 1,500 trap nights, the only captures were some polecat-ferrets and stoats.

To the south of the project area, in Wester Ross, a total of 15 American mink have been removed by local keepers and volunteers (including 1 road kill and 1 washed up carcass on a beach). A number of sightings indicate that American mink are slowly creeping up the



## Cromarty Firth - Lynn Brydon

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Reports by fishing ghillies and gamekeepers involved in the project have shown a marked reduction in American mink numbers from previous years along the Conon and Blackwater Rivers.

One female American mink was caught in the spring at Contin on the Blackwater River and there was a single sighting further up the river system at Loch Luichart by a game keeper. Traps have been in place with no success to date.

Localised mink signs and sightings have appeared on the Black Isle along the Cromarty Firth coast line and there has been one male mink capture here.

A Balnagown Estate gamekeeper reported sightings of American mink. Traps have been set and as of yet no success.

This highlights the importance of continued monitoring and vigilance by volunteers. Work has progressed well in expanding the area, with 30 new mink volunteers.

Working with Community groups has proven valuable, as this results in a close network of volunteers in one given area. This has improved dissemination of information and also results in a quick response when a mink is reported!

Ferintosh Environment Group have been very supportive of SMI and have a pro-active group of members reporting signs and sightings of American mink promptly.

SMI volunteers are also reporting signs of invasive n on native plants when they are in the field. This has proved valuable information for keeping records up to date for the Cromarty Firth region.

Ferintosh Environment group have even started their own eradication programme of Himalayan Balsam in their area !





# Mink Control Officer Updates



## Cairngorms and Moray

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Following the departure of Cat Robinson in the summer, Hollie Walker (Scottish Mink Initiative Coordinator) is now the main point of contact for Cairngorms and Moray. Hollie will receive assistance from Gunnar Scholtz (North Highlands Mink Control Officer) and the Findhorn, Nairn and Lossie Fisheries Trust. Hollie can assist with equipment requirements and general enquiries, however is unable to help with dispatch. If you require help with dispatch a local dispatcher will be organised for you. Please do not set traps if you are unable to dispatch and are not in touch with someone who can.

Since August a keen network of volunteers has been set up in the Elgin/Lossiemouth/Covesea area (comprising both newly recruited and existing volunteers). The group work together managing their local American mink populations with some people dispatching American mink for those that only monitor and trap. To date the network has caught one mink in Covesea. A similar system is starting up at the Scottish Wildlife Trust's Spey Bay.

In addition to the Covesea mink, 1 mink was caught in Garmouth in late August and another was caught in the Findhorn catchment around the same time. Raft monitoring reports have been increasing with over 40 submitted. American mink signs are appearing in Covesea area, the River Lossie, River Spey and the River Nairn catchments.



## North Tayside - Ann-Marie MacMaster

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A total of 31 American mink have been removed from north Tayside since August: Tay (3); Isla (8); Lunan Water (15); South Esk (2); North Esk (2); and Bervie Water (1). A high number of American mink were removed from the Lunan Water catchment however not as many as were trapped during the same period last year (29). We expect to see a reduction in numbers with continued effort across the project area however in the case of the Lunan Water (on the southern edge of the project area) we expect to be continually invaded by American mink moving in from the south.

25 new rafts have gone out since August bringing the total number of rafts in North Tayside to 210: Lunan Water (29); South Esk (27); North Esk (23); Bervie Water (12); Benholm (1); Isla (38); Ericht (12); Garry (12); Tummel (20); and Tay (36).

Some interesting American mink have been removed from the top end of the Lunan Water catchment. To date 6 mink have been trapped at one location – 3 of which were an unusual silver colour. These are the only such coloured American mink which have been

removed from north Tayside. Typically the American mink is glossy, dark brown however it is thought that 'unusually' coloured mink stem from the experimental breeding which once took place on fur farms.

There are areas where confirmed mink signs have been recorded however trapping has not yet proved successful... I would like to thank all the North Tayside volunteers for their time but especially those attempting to catch American mink on the Luther Water, River Isla, Pow Burn and Bervie Water – don't give up!



Alastair Fenn, Bio-security Officer for the Deveron, Bogie & Isla Rivers Trust has moved back to Northern Ireland after working for 3 years on a Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) funded programme to control Invasive Non-Native Species (INNS).



During Alastair's time a total of 207 American mink were removed from the Deveron district (excluding those trapped by keepers/ghillies

which were not reported). A diverse range of volunteers have been recruited during the initial project from fishing ghillies, farmers, gamekeepers, rangers, school children, members of the public and keen wildlife enthusiasts.

SNH are funding a 1 year extension which includes a grazing trial of Giant Hogweed using black faced wether lambs to control the emerging plants without the need to spray.

Robin Vasey, who has been with the Trust since it started in 2001, is taking over the bio-security role and will be concentrating on recruiting volunteers to monitor/trap American mink in the small burns that have not previously been covered, in particular around Turriff. Robin will continue to manage the current network of 72 monitoring rafts which covers 485.38 km<sup>2</sup>.



[www.scottishmink.org.uk](http://www.scottishmink.org.uk)



## Aberdeenshire - Jim Mann

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Massive trapping pressure across Aberdeenshire has continued to pay dividends for the project. In particular a seven day period during the dispersal season saw 15 American mink removed from across the region! Well done to all concerned.

Jim plans to continue the trapping effort for a full year in order to establish the optimum times when our efforts can best be utilised. To this end, trapping effort during the breeding, birthing and dispersal season saw a marked increase in the number of females captured, this in turn has resulted in far fewer captures of juveniles during the dispersal and this must surely have an impact on the mink numbers in our region.

Whilst the number of American mink caught has understandably dropped off since the dispersal season, captures remain steady. The onset of the colder weather means that American mink will have to feed more in order to sustain their condition so please continue to monitor and trap where possible. The total number of American mink caught since Jim began in spring is a staggering 140!



The photo opposite is of a 'monster mink' caught on the North Ugie near Fetterangus in November. He measured 22 inches long and 11 inches around his girth! There's no doubt the wildlife on the North Ugie will all be safer without this predator trying to find a meal or 2!



## Engaging local communities and the general public in the management of invasive non-native species

Marie Pages-Gold is a PhD student at the University of Aberdeen and the James Hutton Institute looking at local communities' and volunteers' engagement in the management of invasive non-native species. Marie will be looking at people's motivations for getting involved in invasive species management, how to keep the momentum of volunteer-driven initiatives going and what benefits could communities' involvement produce for both the environment and people.

The project will be carried out in partnership with RAFTS and other organisations and individuals interested in invasive non-native species management. The project will run between October 2012 and March 2016.

Please feel free to get in touch by email should you have any questions for Marie:

[marie.pages@hutton.ac.uk](mailto:marie.pages@hutton.ac.uk)



## The Nature of Scotland Awards



An RSPB Scotland award scheme, honouring outstanding achievements in nature conservation, has opened for nominations. The **Nature of Scotland Awards** aims to recognise

excellence and innovation from individuals, projects and organisations who work hard to conserve Scotland's precious natural heritage, habitats and species. The 2013 awards opened for entries on the 14th November 2012.

There are eight categories to enter, each identifying a different area of nature conservation: Marine Conservation; Sustainable Development; Politician of the Year; Innovation; Outstanding Contribution; RSPB Species Champion; Community Initiative; Education.

If you feel you work with, or know of, an organisation, group or individual who has participated in activity that has aided Scottish nature conservation, we would like to hear from you. Entries are free and the deadline for submission is the **15<sup>th</sup> March 2013**. For more information or to make a nomination, please visit:

[www.rspb.org.uk/natureofscotland](http://www.rspb.org.uk/natureofscotland)



## American Mink and Rodenticides

If ever you have come across a dead or sick animal and suspected that it may have been poisoned, it's likely that specimens will turn up at SASA for toxicology testing. SASA, Science and Advice for Scottish Agriculture, operates the Wildlife Incident Investigation Scheme (WIIS) on behalf of the Scottish Government:

<http://www.sasa.gov.uk/wildlife-environment/wildlife-incident-investigation-scheme-wiis/>

WIIS relies upon opportunistic discovery and submission of specimens and aims to confirm or refute any suspicion that animals have been accidentally or deliberately exposed to pesticides and other chemicals. We receive specimens from vets, RSPB, wildlife crime officers and members of the public. Submissions are dominated by raptors and consequently, far fewer mammals are tested. However, an opportunity arose recently to increase our knowledge and database regarding the extent of exposure of a top (albeit unwanted) mammalian predator, the American mink.

SASA also monitors the levels of rat and mouse poisons (rodenticides) that contaminate a wide variety of non-target animals and birds, and were able to make use of University of Aberdeen's supply of mink carcasses accumulated from their involvement in the SMI. Although mink are not targeted directly, they consume dead or dying rats and mice that have themselves been poisoned. Investigations would provide insight into the extent of secondary contamination of a generalist predator.

Results obtained are intriguing....86% of the 22 mink livers tested so far contained residues of various rodenticides. We're now working with the University of Aberdeen to find out if mink can be used as a sentinel species to assess the impact of rodenticide use on non-target carnivores.

*Dr Gill Hartley, Senior Wildlife Advisor (Pesticides and Wildlife), SASA*



## Changes in Data Submission and Information Provision

SMI is currently looking into ways that may allow scaling up Mink control even further whilst still being able to assist volunteers well. The development of these innovations, conducted in partnership with the University of Aberdeen's Digital Economy hub 'dot.rural', is gradual and may result in slight differences among volunteers in both data submission and feedback arrangements.

The MinkApp team  
dot.rural, University of Aberdeen



### Winter is here, please be careful!

With winter fast approaching it is a good time to check the condition of your rafts and consider replacing any parts as required.

The addition of salt to your clay will ensure that any movement on the clay can still be recorded in cold temperatures.

PLEASE BE CAREFULL WHEN CHECKING RAFTS DURING ANY ADVERSE WEATHER YOUR SAFETY IS PARAMOUNT, REMEMBER RAFTS AND EQUIPMENT CAN BE REPLACED - YOU CAN'T!



### Cheerio Alistair, hello Robin!

Alistair Fenn left the Deveron, Bogie and Isla Fisheries Trust in mid October after 3 years as their Biosecurity Officer.

We welcome Robin Vasey who takes over the Biosecurity role for the Trust. Robin's contact details are as follows:

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07771 874579



### National Park Volunteer Awards

It was announced in November that the winners of award were the Lake District National Park Volunteer-Led Activity Programme.

More details can be found here:

<http://www.nationalparks.gov.uk/press/pressreleases/pr-volunteerawardswinner.htm>



### Check out our new-look website!

[www.scottishmink.org.uk](http://www.scottishmink.org.uk)

Our new-look website went live on 1 October, please have a look and let us know what you think! There are a number of new features including monthly regional updates, found under 'News'.



### Merry Christmas Everyone!

The SMI team would like to take this opportunity to thank each and every volunteer for their time and enthusiasm - without you the project would not exist.

We hope you have a lovely Christmas and a cheery New Year and we look forward to working with you in 2013!



This project is being part-financed by the Scottish Government and European Community Cairngorms, Highland, Moray, Rural Aberdeenshire and Rural Tayside Local Action Groups LEADER 2007 – 2013 Programme