

Scottish Mink Initiative

Working with Communities to Protect Native Wildlife



Newsletter No. 11 August 2014

Scottish Mink Initiative Funding Update

We are delighted to announce that the Scottish Government have confirmed SNH funding for the Scottish Mink Initiative through to August 2015! Mink raft and volunteer networks will continue to be coordinated by your local fisheries trust.

This is most welcome news as these funds will enable the fisheries trusts to continue to deliver the SMI aims and objectives.

Keep Your Eyes Peeled!



While you are out and about keep your eyes peeled - and cameras at the ready. Photos of mink are useful to SMI for raising awareness and verifying sightings. These photos are just a few of the best we have received this year.

If you have taken any photos or recorded footage of mink going about their business and would be happy to share them with SMI, please e-mail them to mink@rafts.org.uk.

Island Community Set To Eradicate Mink

Residents of a small island on the west coast of Scotland have joined forces to eradicate mink. With enormous amounts of enthusiasm and expert advice and resources, they are sure to secure their island as 'mink-free'.

The island of Gigha lies ~ 3.5 km west of the Kintyre peninsula. Residents first discovered they had a mink problem four years ago. One islander suffered repeated attacks on his domestic birds and started trapping. Having caught several mink it soon became clear that he could not solve this problem on his own and he looked to SNH for advice.

SNH staff from the Hebridean Mink Project (HMP) believed that Gigha's mink population were isolated and there was a good chance of maintaining a mink-free island following an intensive trapping programme.

A public meeting held on Gigha revealed an enthusiastic community eager to get involved in every aspect of an eradication project. The HMP team devised a strategy

which involved intensive live-capture trapping at high density across the island. Volunteers were trained in positioning and digging in traps, humane dispatch and the release of non-target species.

More than 80 traps were positioned throughout the island in winter 2013. In the weeks that followed the capture rates steadily fell and by the end of the breeding season 36 animals had been dispatched (13 caught in the same trap location!). Gradually captures came to a stand still with the last capture being made more than 10 weeks ago.

The mink eradication programme on Gigha is inspirational in demonstrating what can be achieved when enthusiastic volunteers are given the tools and support required to remove an invasive species.

The Gigha eradication programme is not part of the SMI work area and there are no plans to include Gigha (or any part of Argyll) as such in the foreseeable future.

West Sutherland Fisheries Trust - Kate Batchelor

The first confirmed mink in west Sutherland since 2012 was found at the beginning of March. A large dead male mink was found above the high water mark at Reiff near Achiltibuie, the cause of death is unknown. Whilst there had been a couple of sightings in the Achiltibuie area at the start of the year, no mink have actually been caught nearby since the capture on Tanara, Summer Isles, in January 2012.



Since May several more potential sightings have been reported in the Assynt and Coigach areas. The first was spotted at Achmelvich beach near Lochinver followed by two further sightings at Achnacaran and Rubha Coigeach. Whilst some areas are too remote to trap, local volunteers have responded very quickly monitoring extra tracking tunnels and traps wherever possible. In addition to these sightings, the continuing reports of mink further south around Ullapool highlight the need to remain vigilant even when there are no prints on the rafts, so once again a huge thank you to all our dedicated volunteers without whose efforts the project would not be possible!

We are very pleased to welcome two new volunteers this summer but there is always room for more so if you are interested in helping monitor for or trap mink please get in touch!

Kate Batchelor, West Sutherland Fisheries Trust, 01971 502259, wsft@btconnect.com

www.scottishmink.org.uk

Wester Ross Fisheries Trust - Peter Cunningham

So far summer 2014 has been a much better year for breeding terns, with Common tern chicks fledged at Mellon Charles and on heather island in Loch Gairloch.

However, there have also been several recent reports of mink within the area: one was trapped at Mellon Charles, Laide (a mink family was found under the jetty), Dundonnell (one was dispatched by a local resident) and by hill lochs at 400m altitude above Loch Broom (mink seen by angler: too difficult to access), highlight the on-going threat of mink breeding within the area. We also had a report of a probable mink close to the Fionn Loch towards the top of the Little Gruinard river, another area which is not easily accessible.

There is a good and growing level of support from local residents within the Wester Ross area. Additional tracking tunnels have recently been deployed around Loch Ewe and Gruinard Bay. Given the low human population densities in the area, the support of a high proportion of local people is necessary to maintain progress.

There is much to do to restore seabird populations around Wester Ross. We visited Gruinard island where ground nesting bird populations, especially gulls, have collapsed over the past 10 years; three mink were caught on the island last year. Other factors including changes in food availability for seabirds may also have affected bird breeding success; however on the island of Longa (Loch Gairloch) gull populations remain relatively healthy.

Thank you to all volunteers for their continued support to help control mink within Wester Ross and thereby limit their spread within the north of Scotland.



Peter Cunningham, Wester Ross Fisheries Trust, info@wrft.org.uk, 01445 712899

Cromarty Firth Fisheries Trust - Lynn Brydon

July has been a busy month in the Cromarty Firth region with mink activity. In particular a number of mink sightings have been recorded around Tain. Mink have been seen crossing the road at Calrossie and Fearn and hunting along road side verges. On the Black Isle mink have been seen on the road at Eathie and unbelievably a member of the public watched as a mink straddled the back of a day old roe deer kid at Resolis! In the Muir of Ord and Conon areas mink have been seen crossing the road on two occasions and one road kill has been noted in this area. This flurry of sightings reflects the time of year when kits are leaving the den and learning to hunt with their mother before they disperse to establish their own territories. As a consequence of these sightings I have been busy following them up and recruiting new volunteers.

The story in Avoch Bay continues with a large number of Arctic tern chicks having been killed again this summer. Tracking tunnels and traps (with otter guards) have been set up but as yet we cannot confirm if this is otter or mink predation.

A mink volunteer on the Black Isle recorded Himalayan balsam growing along the Newhall burn. This is a new record of the invasive plant in this area and it has resulted in early removal and hopefully prevention of further spread downstream.

I recently attended a water vole survey course run by TCV. I learned about water voles, their habitat and how to recognise signs of their presence and I hope to pass this knowledge on to volunteers in my area.



Lynn Brydon, Cromarty Firth Fisheries Trust, 07428 189161, lynn.brydon@hotmail.co.uk

Ness and Beaully Fisheries Trust - Chris Daphne

The last few months have been a busy time for the Ness and Beaully Fisheries Trust. The trust has undergone a few changes including the recruitment of a new biologist, Chris Daphne, who is now coordinating the raft and volunteer work.

More volunteers are urgently required within the catchments - this is even more necessary due to the number of recent sightings on the River Ness in the town centre where a family of six mink have been reported on two locations, their close proximity to one another suggests that it is the same family. There have also been sightings on the Caledonian Canal, River Enrick and on the River Beaully. The sighting on the Caledonian Canal was filmed by Michelle Douglas and is now on our Mink Channel why not take a look? <http://www.scottishmink.org.uk/mink-channel/>



Traps have been set in all of these locations and are monitored by the trust biologists. Although we have yet to make a capture two juvenile mink were dispatched by anglers on the river bank. A pine marten was trapped and released without harm on the River Beaully.

We are pleased to note that the recent reports of mink have all come from members of the public rather than existing volunteers, which suggests that word is spreading with regards who to report mink sightings to. We plan to run an event in the coming months in order to raise awareness and we hope that more volunteers will come forward to help monitor for and trap mink in the priority areas within the catchments.

Chris Daphne, Ness & Beaully Fisheries Trust, 01463 783505, chris.nbft@gmail.com

Spey Foundation - Polly Burns

It's been a quiet couple of months on the Spey catchment in terms of mink sightings and captures. Since the captures at the beginning of the year there has been little evidence of mink. The raft network continues to develop though, fortunately gaining some new rafts and volunteers. The RSPB Community Ranger spotted a badly damaged raft, and got in touch to request a replacement. The raft has now been replaced and we are delighted to have monitoring in the area again and an enthusiastic new volunteer. Mink often target ground nesting birds (predating on adult birds, chicks and eggs) so working with the RSPB is a brilliant opportunity for both SMI and RSPB to see the benefits to local wildlife.

Despite the new rafts going out, I am still stumbling across old, broken rafts. I thought this one wasn't doing anything, but when I removed it from the water some juvenile fish swam out from beneath it; it obviously hadn't been disturbed for quite some times! It's really important that we replace rafts like these and continue

to monitor for mink so do get in touch if you are aware of a raft in a similar condition. Thank you to all the volunteers regularly checking their rafts, despite the lack of signs!



Polly Burns, Ness & Spey Foundation, p.burns@speyfisheryboard.com, 01340 810841

www.scottishmink.org.uk

Findhorn, Nairn and Lossie Fisheries Trust - Bob Laughton

After a flurry of sightings and captures during the winter and spring, it has been fairly quiet of late in the Findhorn, Nairn and Lossie catchments.

Traps and rafts have remained active thanks to our local volunteers and bailiffs, Sean Maclean (Findhorn and Lossie) and Alastair Skinner (Nairn). New rafts have been established in the Tomatin area, where mink have been recorded in the past, however to date no sightings or prints have been reported. We have had no reports of sightings this summer so far on the Findhorn.



However we are seeing a different pattern on the Lossie catchment and along the Moray coast. Adult mink near Cooper Park in Elgin and near Spynie Loch were reported, traps were duly set and two mink subsequently captured.

Out at Covesea on the coast, volunteer John Hall, successfully captured a juvenile mink in June although he has also reported signs of a family group in the area in the last few days. Perhaps the recent good weather has prompted them to head to the beach! Baited traps are in place and ready to go!

Bob Laughton, Findhorn, Nairn & Lossie Fisheries Trust, director@fnlft.org.uk, 01309 611 220

Deveron, Bogie and Isla - Robin Vasey

2014 has (so far!) been very quiet on the mink front with only 2 mink captures. These mink were caught in the Glass area on the Deveron catchment where farm poultry were being predated.

Traps have been set to intercept a known mink in the Clatt area. Once again, farm poultry were being taken but the creature, has yet to be captured even though it has been seen on several occasions walking down the road!

It has been great to see many successful broods of mallard on the river this spring and summer especially on the confluence of the Isla and Deveron where we removed 6 mink last year.

A mink sighting on the coast was reported this spring however we have been unable to follow this up due to difficult terrain which is sparsely populated.

Volunteers on the Water of Philorth and Loch of Strathbeg near Fraserburgh have not reported any mink sightings or captures this year.



Robin Vasey, Deveron, Bogie & Isla Fisheries Trust, 07771 874 579, robinvasey@deveron.org

River Don, Ythan and Ugie Catchments - Matt Oliver

The current level of mink activity across the Don and Ythan catchments is the lowest I have witnessed since I first became involved with mink control in NE Scotland (way back in 2006). There have only been two mink captures in the last nine months, both on the Bents Burn near Alford, and signs and sightings have also been few and far between. From the regular and widespread raft checks now being submitted online, and having had the chance to visit a large number of you in person, I am confident that this is due to a decline in mink numbers, rather than a lack of vigilance.

In the last few weeks there have been a couple of sightings on the Ythan around Fyvie and Udney Green so I have notified existing volunteers as well as starting up some new recruits, so hopefully it'll be contained quickly.



In the next few months I aim to intensify the volunteer network in the lower Don (as well as starting work on the Ugie), which previously produced a large number of mink, but where raft coverage is currently a bit sparse. If you know of anyone between Inverurie and Donmouth that may be willing and able to volunteer, then please put them in touch with me.

In the mean time please keep checking your rafts and keep an eye out for other wildlife that may be benefitting from the reduced presence of mink.

Many thanks to all for your ongoing support, Matt.

Matt Oliver, mattoliverecology@gmail.com, 07882 560603

River Dee Fisheries Trust - Jamie Urquhart

Deeside has seen a flurry of mink activity across the catchment in recent weeks. As a result I would ask you to be extra vigilant over the summer if you're out and about on the river, its tributaries or with regards to monitoring your rafts.

As the summer progresses we will begin to see more movement from adult female mink and her offspring as they begin exploring their surroundings, adult males will also be on the move and more apparent at this time followed by the dispersal of juveniles, typically from August onwards.



Historically the summer months of July, August and September have been our key months for juvenile mink captures and I would urge you to let me know now if you require any materials, traps, clay etc in order that we are fully prepared for this busy period.

The good news is that there have been two mink captures: one at Crathes Castle (a first for the NTS team) and another at Tilbouries Fishing beat down by Drumoak on the south bank of the Dee. A lactating female was caught at Drumoak following a sighting by one of the Dee ghillies, so this is great news!

We have been spreading the word through our 'Intro Dee' educational programme over the weeks prior to the school holidays. Seven schools have been participating in our programme and we have several potential new volunteers as a result.

Thanks again to all our volunteers - keep up the good work.

Jamie Urquhart, River Dee Fisheries Trust, 01339 880411 , Jamie@riverdee.org

www.scottishmink.org.uk

Esk Rivers Fisheries Trust - Nigel McMullen

It has been very quiet over the last few months on the Lunan Water, South Esk, North Esk and Bervie Water catchments. I have been trying to contact as many volunteers as possible to see how things are going. I have replaced damaged or lost equipment and I am pleased to report that not very much has been lost.

We welcome a new volunteer on the Brothock Water who started in May and was successful in catching a mink only a few weeks after he started! A second capture was made on the River South Esk in June.

After a mink was reported chasing ducks on a pond near the Luther Water on the North Esk catchment I visited the site and a mink raft is now in place.

I hope that with few sightings, signs on rafts and captures being reported that this indicates a decline in mink and that SMI is having some success - long may it continue!

I will continue to monitor progress and hopefully get new rafts established in areas that are not currently covered at the moment.

i would like to thank all volunteers for their continued support with this work.



Nigel McMullen, Esk Rivers Fisheries Trust, 07786 060431 , ngmcm1@aol.com

North Tay - Ann-Marie MacMaster

Things continue to be relatively quiet on the North Tay catchment, with reported captures confined to the Lunan Burn (1) and the Isla catchment (4).

I am in the process of getting in touch with all volunteers in my area to find out how much damage hurricane Bertha did on Sunday 10 August. So far things aren't looking too bad. If you need equipment to get your raft operational again, have recorded mink prints on your raft or have seen a mink please let me know.

In a couple of areas mink are keeping us busy with their antics.....

One volunteer who has kept hens for years suddenly had a visit from a mink for the first time. I assumed this to be a dispersing juvenile.... A chat with their neighbour revealed that there was a mink den at the bottom of the neighbour's garden, less than 20 m from the hen enclosure....

Elsewhere one chap who has had a raft for several months has yet to make a capture however some very sneaky mink live near him - he has taken countless images like the one below with his still camera

The unpredictable and opportunistic nature of mink make them a very successful invasive species and one which keeps us on our toes!



Ann-Marie MacMaster, 07825 186043, ann-marie@rafts.org.uk

Submitting Your Raft Check Data

If you haven't already been on-line to record data from your raft checks why not log in and give it a try?

Follow these simple steps:

1. <http://www.dotrural.ac.uk/smi/index.php?r=user/login>
2. Your username is your e-mail address
3. The password is 'NoMinkGoodNews'
4. Simply choose the raft you checked, the date you checked it and the species recorded on the raft - we even want to know if you didn't record anything.
5. Don't forget to hit 'create'... and that's all there is to it!



New Pine Marten Research



Dr Emma Sheehy has recently started a post-doc at the University of Aberdeen, looking at a number of aspects of the ecology of the recovering Pine marten population in Scotland.

If you come across a road kill Pine marten (between now and September 2016) Emma would be grateful if the following could be provided:

- Ear of pine marten (easily snipped off with scissors/pocket knife) stored in zip-lock bag
- Grid reference
- Sex of animal (if possible)
- Date of collection
- Name and e-mail address of sender

The sample and information should be posted to: Dr Emma Sheehy, Room 417, Zoology Building, University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen, AB24 2TZ

If it is not possible to post the sample on the same day samples should be stored in a freezer. Taking a small clump of hairs would be a good alternative if an ear sample is not possible. Hair samples should either be posted or frozen immediately as the DNA in hair samples can degrade quite quickly. (E-mail: emmasheehy@abdn.ac.uk)

Other Invasive Species Projects in Scotland

Invasive Non Native Plant Species

Invasive non native plants (INNPS) are found across much of Scotland and can have a devastating impact on riparian ecosystems.

Those plant species deemed the most damaging to fresh water environments are: Himalayan balsam, Japanese knotweed, Rhododendron and Giant hogweed. These plants were originally brought to the UK as ornamental plants for private gardens however they have now spread far and wide. They cause problems such as out competing native plants for sunlight and river bank erosion.



Since invasive plants are often found on water courses they feature highly in fisheries trust biosecurity plans. Cromarty Firth Fisheries Trust is just one trust working to control INNPS on their catchments.

As with mink control a coordinated, landscape scale approach is required to ensure that INNPS removal is as effective as possible. Each plant is controlled in a different way: Himalayan balsam is pulled from the ground or slashed; Japanese knotweed is stem injected or sprayed; Giant Hogweed is sprayed or the tap root is cut; and Rhododendron is sprayed, the lever and mulch technique is used or the stem is drilled and injected.



The Deveron, Bogie and Isla Fisheries Trust are currently trialling a unique method to control Giant hogweed - they are using black-faced sheep which have a

pigmentation in their skin which prevents them from blistering when they eat it. If proven successful this method of control would be far favourable to chemical spraying.



The CCFT INNPS control works are funded by the SEPA Restoration Fund, the Cromarty Firth Fishery Trust and supported by RAFTS. The Conservation Volunteers are contracted for the duration of the 5 year programme and the Dingwall and Ferintosh Environment Groups organise volunteer days for the removal of Himalyan balsam along the rivers Peffery and Conon.

CCFT have successfully removed 6.5 km of Rhododendron on the River Orrin. This control work means that new salmon habitat has been established which in turn has led to social and economic benefits for the local area. With funding from the Woodland Trust native trees have been planted along the riparian zones of the River Orrin where Rhododendron once grew.



For more information on INNPS please see: <http://www.nonnativespecies.org>.

If you spot an invasive plant whilst out checking your mink raft, or if you would like to help with INNPS removal in your area, please contact your local fisheries trust.

Other Invasive Species Projects in Scotland

Saving Scotland's Red Squirrels

A popular native mammal species in Scotland, the red squirrel is threatened by the non-native North American grey squirrel. Its decline is attributed to both direct and disease-mediated competition. Grey squirrels are carriers of the Squirrelpox virus (SQPV), a disease fatal to red squirrels, and naturally displace red squirrels in many habitats through competition. Saving Scotland's Red Squirrels has shown that management to counteract the spread of grey squirrels and disease can protect red squirrels from further decline in Scotland.



SQPV is carried by the grey squirrel who suffers no ill effects however if the red squirrel contracts the disease it can suffer from: discharge around the eyes, mouth, feet and genitalia; lesions and scabs with swelling; skin ulcers; and increasing lethargy as the disease progresses.

The Saving Scotland's Red Squirrels (SSRS) project works to reverse the replacement of reds by greys through co-ordinated landscape-scale grey squirrel control delivered by networks of grant-funded landowners, volunteers and project staff. As with the Scottish Mink Initiative members of the public can volunteer to help monitor, trap and dispatch grey squirrels. Evidence shows that red squirrel range contraction in project areas has been halted, with



multiple incidences of local recoveries after absences of many years.

A series of spring surveys shows a trend of grey squirrels being lost from sites where both species were detected earlier. Likewise, mapping comparing distributions before the project with those of the last two years shows a reduction in range of grey squirrels in Aberdeenshire and in the Strathyre area. In addition red squirrel recovery has been recorded in Aberdeen, Perthshire, Angus, northern parts of Stirling and parts of southern Scotland.



Analysis of trapping effort and capture data found that sustained control has an accumulating effect, producing ongoing reductions in the grey squirrel population. However, trapping must be sustained to prevent reinvasion.

In southern Scotland, where a major aim has been to contain the spread of SQPV in order to prevent it from reaching the uninfected grey squirrels of central Scotland, it has become evident that red squirrel populations can survive in the presence of SQPV if grey squirrel densities are kept very low. This is a finding of major importance, as independent statistical modelling has shown that, although the project has slowed the rate of spread, the virus has continued to consolidate and to expand slowly northwards.

If you would like more information on SSRS please see www.scottishsquirrels.org.uk. If you would like to get involved please contact Scottish Wildlife Trust on 0131 312 7765 or reception@swt.org.uk.

Saving Scotland's Red Squirrels is a Project run by the Scottish Wildlife Trust in partnership with Scottish Natural Heritage, Forestry Commission Scotland, Red Squirrel Survival Trust and Scottish Land and Estates.

New PhD Study

Expanding mink control in Scotland while preventing reinvasion of mink-free areas presents many challenges. In October Ewan McHenry will begin a PhD funded by the University of Aberdeen and Mammal Trust UK and aims to investigate the landscape features that can be used to identify key areas for mink productivity that can be used to optimise control as the project expands.

Ewan completed his undergraduate and master's degrees at the University of Aberdeen. His previous research investigated the effectiveness of habitat creation for the conservation of the Scottish wood ant and improved the survey methodologies used to monitor the expansion of the pine marten in Scotland and Ireland. More recently Ewan has been working as a field assistant at the University of Aberdeen on a project to assess the difficulties in controlling the invasive American signal crayfish, a species known to be an important prey for American mink.

Goodbye Yolanda!

After 3 years working as part of the research team at University of Aberdeen, Dr Yolanda Melero is leaving to return to Spain. Yolanda's primary research focus was mink fecundity and reinvasion movements.

Yolanda will be based in Barcelona where she will work at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, in collaboration with the city hall in a project which aims to increase biodiversity in the city. Her research studies include how the creation of new gardens in the city could attract and maintain populations of butterflies and birds in the city.



In addition Yolanda will continue to work on the SMI data and we hope to see some new results from her recent work in the next newsletter.

We wish you well in sunny Spain Yolanda!

Fisheries Trust Updates Now on SMI Website

Please check out our website for more frequent updates from the fisheries trusts - simply go to www.scottishmink.org.uk and then hover over the 'News' tab and a drop down list will appear - simply click on the fisheries trust update you would like to view.

We would love to hear what you think of the updates and indeed the website and newsletter - if you would like to leave feedback simply click on the 'Send us your feedback' button on the home page and complete the short form.

Polecat Records Wanted by Vincent Wildlife Trust

The Vincent Wildlife Trust (VWT) are carrying out a national polecat survey which aims to gather up-to-date information on the distribution of the polecat in Britain. They are keen to receive records (collected during 2014-2015) of road casualty or wild-living polecats, polecat-ferrets and feral ferrets (verified by photos and/or carcasses where possible), from anywhere in mainland Britain.

For further information please see <http://www.vwt.org.uk/our-work/projects/national-polecat-survey> or if you have seen any polecats, polecat-ferrets or feral ferrets whilst out checking your mink rafts please send details to enquiries@vwt.org.uk or telephone 01531 636441.

