

Scottish Mink Initiative

Working with Communities to Protect Native Wildlife



Newsletter No. 5 March 2012

Scottish Mink Initiative in 2012

The SMI team have been planning priority work areas for 2012. The accompanying map shows clearly in red where those all important areas of focus will be.

In North Tayside work will focus on the Bervie Water and North Esk catchments in Angus to prevent encroachment of mink into Aberdeenshire. A secondary target area will be the North Tay (main stem of the Tay between Loch Tay outflow and its confluence with the Tummel) in order to reduce low inland mink populations and prevent mink entering north Tayside from the west.

In Aberdeenshire work will focus on increasing raft coverage on the River Don. The Ugie, Strathbeg and Water of Philorth are also areas of high priority.

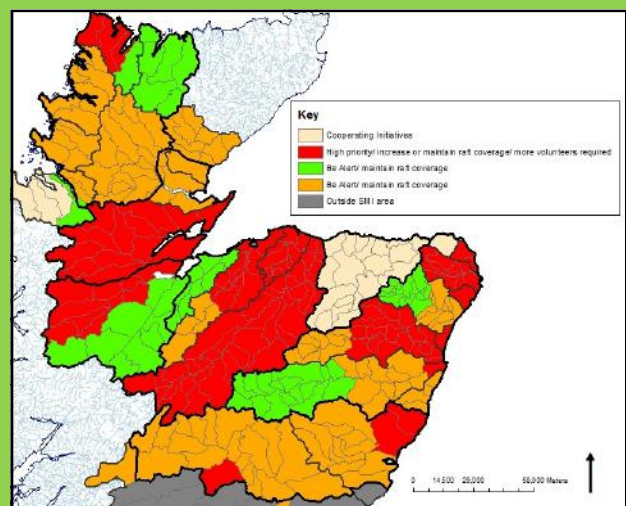
Work will focus on maintaining the raft network on the Spey catchment in the Cairngorms and Moray area.

Plans are underway to expand raft coverage in North West Scotland, targeting the Durness and Eribol areas. Together with using monitoring rafts, 20-30 traps will be set in the target areas to attempt to capture the possible mink that were sighted in 2011. Once optimum raft coverage has been established, efforts will be focused on moving south along the west coast covering parts of Assynt and Ullapool.

Cromarty Firth Fisheries Trust is making good progress

within their catchment recruiting volunteers and deploying rafts across the whole area. Ness and Beauly are due to take on increased responsibility for the management of American mink this year, focussing primarily on the Beauly and to the north west of the Ness.

While some areas are designated high priority (red) this in no way means the remaining catchments are unimportant. Volunteers in these areas are encouraged to remain vigilant for mink and maintain the existing raft coverage. New volunteers are very much welcome across the project area.



Dee District Salmon Fishery Board

In August 2013 The Scottish Mink Initiative will come to end however it is hoped that the management of local mink monitoring and trapping will be taken over by interested organisations such as a Fishery Board. Here Adrian Hudson, a Biologist from the Dee Fishery Board, talks about his own experiences with mink and how he feels about the take over.

'I first became aware of American mink on the River Dee in the early 1990s during a survey. We came across over a dozen female salmon with their stomachs torn open and eggs strewn everywhere. Mink had found these fish after they had run into the burn, and the water level had dropped, leaving them bottlenecked in a small pool. Localised trapping began soon after this discovery. The effort and intensity was greatly increased following the

inception of the North East Water Vole Project. The GWCT designed rafts and network of volunteers lead to another huge leap in coverage and effectiveness. From the early days of control - when making a significant dent in numbers seemed like a pipe dream - we have progressed to a situation where areas in the western catchment of the Dee have had no reported signs of mink for 6-7 years. Removing breeding American mink is going to be a hard task but one which now seems possible.'

The Dee District Salmon Fishery Board and River Dee Trust have been involved in the mink control programmes from the start, initially just by running rafts. They now act as a depot for equipment to support the work of the Scottish Mink initiative on the Dee catchment. If you require more kit or you would like to become involved, please contact the River Dee Trust on 01339 880411, info@riverdee.org or visit the website at www.riverdee.org.

Research Update from University of Aberdeen

Why should we continue to check rafts in the absence of mink?

You have just returned from checking your mink raft and yet again have found no evidence of mink. If you were lucky you might have found an otter spraint on top of the tunnel. You would be forgiven for thinking 'Why should I continue doing this? What's the point? There have not been any mink in this catchment for months, maybe even years'.

Dr Yolanda Melero, who recently began work at University of Aberdeen explains why this is so important.

Since the first mink project began in 2004, 880 American mink have been removed from the project area. However given that the project area is surrounded by uncontrolled mink populations, there is the continual threat of re-invasion from the periphery. It is known that individual mink are capable of extensive



movements so much so that the whole project area remains at risk. Since mink are such successful

breeders, it is imperative to remove re-invading mink before their young begin dispersal.

We currently do not know how often the arrival of an individual mink leads to a reinvasion and we hope to answer this important question with new funding from the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC).

Re-colonisation will fail if immigrant mink are unable to find a mate when numbers are low. Male mink roaming far and wide in search of scarce females may be exposed to increased mortality however females are also at risk. In common with other mustelids, un-mated females remain in heat, resulting after some time in anaemia, poor body condition and potentially, death. It must be remembered that even scarce immigrant mink may meet and mate if they are consistently attracted to prey rich areas.

Thus work has begun to compare the distance travelled by mink in areas (and times) where immigrant mink reach areas with low and high density. Mating failure will be quantified by examining mating scars on the scruff of the female's necks, examine uteri and, where possible, by collecting blood from freshly dispatched females (i.e. not frozen). Yolanda is able to travel to collect blood samples, so if you catch a female between February and May please contact Yolanda by e-mail or telephone: y.melero@abdn.ac.uk or 01224 272789. It is also more important than ever to notify your Mink Control Officer of any mink signs on rafts which do not result in a capture, as this could indicate dispersing mink.

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American mink on the west coast of Scotland

Elaine Fraser began her SNH-funded PhD in October 2009 and aims to develop management plans for the control of American mink in the north and west of Scotland. This involves studying the distribution, habitat use and dispersal patterns of mink in Scotland.

Elaine will investigate the current distribution and historic spread of mink in Scotland using sightings records from various sources with a view to answering the question of why mink have not yet spread further and faster in northern Scotland, and to predict their future rate and direction of spread. Elaine is also using monitoring techniques (rafts and land-based tunnels) and diet analyses to determine the extent to which mink use the coast as a resource. Coastal habitat is assumed to be

more productive and therefore favoured over inland habitat. If this is true it should allow for control measures to be more efficiently targeted across large areas. Finally, by studying the genetics of mink populations in Scotland Elaine will be able to determine where northern mink originated from (i.e. the east or west) and potentially identify important dispersal routes which can subsequently be targeted by control efforts. This is all currently a work in progress!



Air Weapon Legislation Update

In 2011 amendments were made to the current air weapon laws and all those who are dispatching American mink should be aware of the changes - below is a brief outline of those changes and some general points to note. More information can be found on the Home Office website <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/publications/police/firearms/air-weapons-safety-leaflet> or via the Grampian Police Firearms Department (call information line 0845 600 5700).



- It is now an offence for any person in possession of an air weapon to fail to take reasonable precautions to prevent under 18s from gaining unauthorised access to it. The maximum penalty for this new offence is £1,000. It is sufficient to keep the air weapon in a lockable cabinet or cupboard, keeping the keys separate. Alternatively you can secure the weapon to the fabric of the building or to a fixed feature, or anchorage point in the building.
- Air pistols with a muzzle (or kinetic) energy of more than 6 foot-pounds are prohibited weapons.
- It is an offence for someone under 18 to hire or purchase an air weapon or purchase ammunition for an air weapon. It is also an offence to hire, let or make a gift of an air weapon to a person under the age of 18.
- You do not need a license for an air weapon however they are classed as a firearm and are covered by the same legislation as more powerful guns.
- It is an offence to trespass with an air weapon whether in a building or on land – the Scottish Mink Initiative is working to gain written permission from all landowners to allow our volunteers to undertake mink control across the Initiative area.

Please remember that it is a legal requirement to check all traps at least once every 24hrs

Spring is a good time to trap mink—but why?

At this time of the year the American mink breeding season is about to begin which means that males start to move around river catchments in search of females.



Young males will establish their own territories, ensuring that they cover those of several females. This increase in male activity means that it is often the time when males are caught, but it is the females caught at this time of year which are most important as they will have been removed before they are able to breed.

The breeding season usually lasts until May when female

activity starts to decline as they take refuge in a safe den to have their litter.

Of the 663 carcasses retained for research purposes at the University of Aberdeen between 2003 and 2010, 220 were caught between January and May and of these, 46 were identified as females (42 were male and 132 have not been sexed). If these 46 females had not been caught before they bred, potentially there could have been an additional 276 mink in the Scottish countryside (mink have 4-6 kits in each litter) which reiterates why trapping mink at this time of year is so important.

Monster Mink!

A few volunteers have caught some BIG male mink lately - on the River Dee an individual was caught weighing 1.7 kg and on the Isla catchment 1.54 kg!!

To put this in perspective the average weight for a male is 0.9—1.2 kg. If you think you have caught one bigger then please let us know!



Success in the Summer Isles

The first ever mink has been caught on Tanera More in the Summer Isles off the West Coast, after it wiped out a local flock of chickens.

Events and Activities

Aberdeenshire:

- 13 April - SMI presentation for Tarves Heritage Trust members (members only), Melvin Hall, Queens Room, Tarves. 7.30-9pm

North Tayside:

- 6 March - SMI presentation for Brechin Angling Club, Bridge End Bar, Brechin (members only)
- 7 March - SMI presentation at BASC's Gamekeepers Day, Scone Palace, Perth (by invitation only)
- 10 March - 'How to Monitor for Mink' training day—illustrated presentation and workshop, SWT Loch of the Lowes, 10-2pm. Open to all, no charge, booking essential. Please contact Ann-Marie directly
- 28 March - Rivers and Fisheries Trust of Scotland (RAFTS) Conference, Battleby, Perth.
See <http://www.rafts.org.uk/annual-conference/> to book a place
- 10 April - SMI presentation for Montrose History & Antiquarian Society (members only)
- 17 May - SMI presentation for Frickheim and District Hillwalkers Club, Star Inn, Frickheim, 8pm. Members only
- 29 June - 1 July SMI will have a stand at Scone Game Fair, Perth

Highland:

- 15 April - 'Mammal Tracks Training Day' for Blackwater Wildlife Group, Garve, 10am. All welcome, please contact gunnar@rafts.org.uk for details
- 28 April - Cromarty Firth Fisheries Trust Open Hatchery Day, Contin. Please contact Meryl Norris on 07828 140392 or Greenhouse, Dingwall for details
- 17 July - SMI will have a stand at Coigach Annual Gathering
- 21 July - SMI will have a stand at Sutherland Agricultural Show, Dornoch



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Water voles - what's the point in them?

The effect of American mink on water vole numbers in the UK has been well documented. Sometimes we are asked 'What does it matter if we lose water voles - what purpose do they serve anyway?' Research has shown that their burrowing habits aerate soil and the cropping of vegetation increases plant diversity. Further more as this photo by Ewan Weston shows, water voles are food for golden eagle chicks!

Goodbye Sarah!



We are sorry to say that after 2.5 years Sarah will be leaving the Scottish Mink Initiative on the 20th March as she jets off to the land of the long white cloud!

Sarah said 'I have really enjoyed working on both the Scottish Mink Initiative and North East Scotland Water Vole Conservation Project and value the hard work of each and every volunteer in Aberdeenshire. It is anticipated that a new Mink Control Officer will begin soon after my departure and I hope this person will be made to feel as welcome as I was. I would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone who has worked hard towards the success of the project and also those who have made this such a pleasurable job.'



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