



River & Rowing
Museum
Henley on Thames

Wind in the Willows Fact File: Water Vole

In Wind in the Willows:

Kind, good hearted and hospitable.

In the wild:

Appearance

'Ratty' of Wind in the Willows fame is actually a water vole. The British water vole, *Arvicola terrestris amphibious*, is the fastest declining mammal in the UK. They are light to dark brown in colour, with long, thick, glossy fur, upperparts are blackish-grey or warm reddish-brown, underparts are yellowish grey. The water vole has a short, thick head and chubby face with rounded muzzle and small ears and is of similar size to the brown rat, with a head and body length of 12 to 22cm, weighing between 70 to 250 grams.

Diet

They feed predominantly on green waterside vegetation such as flote-grass, reed and reed-grass but do eat nuts, acorns and some roots, storing food underground when it is scarce and difficult to find.

Behaviour

The water vole lives in well vegetated banks of slow-flowing rivers, canals, lakes and ditches. It sleeps in burrows, building a thick-walled breeding nest made of reeds and grasses in an excavated chamber under the bank, in a reed bed or in hollow willow.

Breeding between April and October, the female water vole gives birth to a litter of two to seven naked and blind young after a gestation period of three weeks. Water voles live little longer than a year – with older individuals often being driven out of territories by younger voles and more readily falling victim to predators - water voles are preyed upon by mink, otters, herons, owls, stoats, weasels, rats, pike, eels and large trout.

Dangers

The water vole is one of the most threatened mammals in Britain. It is a priority species within 49 Local Biodiversity Action Plans in the UK. The causes of the water vole population decline include changes in habitat use, pollution and the introduction of the American mink. Mistaken identity with brown rats has also led to cases of poisoning. Beyond the impact of such changes on water voles, their decline also has direct effects on other animals. As a prey animal, fewer water voles mean fewer of all the native animals that prey on them.

