WILDLIFE FACTFLIE: Water vole

The water vole (*Arvicola amphibious*) is the largest British vole as well as being one of our most endangered species.

Water voles can be seen all year round, living along rivers, streams and ditches, around ponds and lakes, marshes, riverbeds and areas of wet moorland – basically any freshwater or wetland habitat! They excavate extensive burrows into banks of waterways which have nest areas at various levels and underwater entrances. Water voles tend to sit and eat in the same place, so piles of nibbled grass and nibbled stems may be found at the water's edge, showing a distinctive 45° angled cut at the ends. Water voles usually have three or four litters of up to five young a year, depending on the weather. If the spring is mild, the first litter can be born in March or April. In colder conditions, breeding can be delayed until May or even June. The young are born underground in a nest within the burrow system and, although blind and hairless at birth, young water voles grow quickly and are weaned at 14 days old.

Water voles have chestnut-brown fur, a blunt rounded nose, small ears and a furry tail. They are often mistaken for brown rats, field voles or bank voles but these species all have slight differences to the water vole to look out for. For example, the brown rat has a pointed face, large ears and a long hairless tail; the field vole is much smaller with grey/brown fur and short tail; and the bank vole is also much smaller, with red/brown fur on top and cream/brown underneath.

Water voles are protected in the UK under the Wildlife and Countryside Act, 1981, and are a priority species under the UK Post-2010 Biodiversity Framework. They have had a long-term decline in Britain and are now absent from at least 94% of areas they used to live. Predation by the invasive American mink has had disastrous effects on water vole population and has caused local extinctions in some areas. Habitat degradation and pollution have also contributed to the decline of the water vole.