

# Henry Smith Playing Field. Potton Water Vole Habitat Management Plan

June 2013  
Updated March 2015

## **Water Voles and Potton**

During the 1800s water voles (*Arvicola amphibius*) were common along riverbanks throughout mainland Britain. Since then they have undergone a dramatic decline caused mainly by habitat loss and predation by American Mink which escaped from fur farms. Populations are now scarce and fragmented. Within Bedfordshire water voles are still found in a few locations including along the Potton Brook. Surveys carried out by The Wildlife Trust over the last three years confirmed that water voles still use the Potton Brook alongside the Henry Smith Playing Field.



The Potton Environment Group is working to improve the habitat along the Brook to increase its suitability for water voles and encourage their population on the site. This suggested management plan aims to build on their work and recommends ways that the habitat could be enhanced further.

## **Habitat Management Suggestions**

### ***Carrot Wash***

This is currently the area used most by the water voles. The tall wetland vegetation within the channel provides them with a good source of food and cover from predation. It has been noticed that in times of flood, when more water flows down the Carrot Wash, it naturally removes some of the vegetation from the centre of the channel keeping it open.

Recent problems in this area have included:

- The track across the carrot wash became clagged up with mud so that water can't get through following "Party on Potton".
- The tops of the sweet grass have been cut by contractors.
- Banks have been mown right up to the edges.

Actions

- It is recommended that the vegetation within the channel is not cut, particularly during the summer when the water voles are more active.
- The habitat along the Carrot Wash could be improved further if a strip of grass approximately 2m wide either side of the channel was also left uncut. This would provide more foraging opportunities for the water voles. These grass strips could be cut once in late summer to a height of 10-15cm to prevent saplings or brambles establishing.
- As the ground is uneven in this area the current mowing regime often leaves bare areas where the mower has caught bumps in the ground. Leaving 2m wide grass strips would also alleviate this mowing problem.
- Leave a buffer or transition habitat (don't mow right up to the edge)
- Stop cutting the sweet grass.

### ***Banks of the Potton Brook around the Carrot Wash***

In recent years good progress has been made to remove brambles and small samplings from the banks of the Brook. This will encourage grass to grow and provide better feeding opportunities for water voles. The work needs to be done in the winter when birds will not be nesting in the vegetation.

The end of the carrot wash where it joins the main waterway has become very overgrown and dark and would benefit from removing some of the ivy, hawthorn and lower branches of the trees to open the area up. This would hopefully allow the sweet grass to colonise this end of the carrot wash and so improve the habitat for the water voles



### **Actions**

- It is recommended that winter management tasks removing brambles and small samplings continue. To promote grass growing on the banks and prevent the bramble and nettles returning, the banks would benefit from being cut more regularly during the summer until a close grass sward has been established. Ideally the areas which have been cleared would be strimmed approximately once per month and cutting frequency reduced, eventually to annual or biannual (July and September) cuts as flower seedlings and grasses establish. Once the nettle and bramble have been brought under control, wildflower seed or plug plants could be introduced to increase the diversity of the Brook edge. As well as improving the area for water voles this would also provide a picturesque edge to the playing field.
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- At the moment there is no marginal vegetation within the main brook near the carrot wash. Allowing more light in and removing some of the encroaching nettles/bramble from the banks would hopefully allow some to colonise as there is lots growing within the carrot wash and the leat on the other side of the playing field. It would be good to allow this to colonise in its own time but if necessary a few clumps of sweet grass could be transplanted from the carrot wash in the future.

### ***Banks of the Potton Brook at the northern end of the Playing Field***

Towards the northern edge of the Playing Field the character of the bankside vegetation changes and the Brook is lined with more established trees. Although the shade that they cast reduces the suitability of the Brook for water voles the trees are used by a wide variety of other wildlife and add to the character of the area. No management work is planned for this section of the Brook.



## **Potton Brook Channel**

The Potton Brook alongside the playing field is straight with steep tall banks along much of its length. Ideal water vole habitat has banks which provide a gradual grassy slope to the water with marginal vegetation at the edge of the river. Creating such a slope at the Henry Smith Playing Field may not be possible but there are some additions which could easily be made to the river channel which would benefit water voles and be attractive.

Though nettles do have some value as cover and to protection the banks from damage it is a shame that there is no long grass habitat and it would be good to have some transition habitat between the trees and the short cropped grass of the playing field.

### **Actions**

- Once the Internal Drainage Board (IDB) have completed their work it may be possible to identify places where marginal vegetation could be planted either on shelves at the edge of the Brook or using matting to provide a shelf. The areas of new planting would provide the water voles with feeding areas close to the water's edge should they need to escape.
- Aim to reduce large areas of nettles and change this to a long grass habitat to provide cover and feeding opportunities for the water voles. Cutting the nettles regularly would weaken them and allow grass to germinate below. We suggest that the mown area is left with a straight edge but the nettles are removed in bays to allow areas of long grass to grow rather than mowing right up to the edge of the nettles. Marker posts might help indicate which areas should be left unmown.
- This management of nettles would need to be regular rather than a one off to prevent the nettles simply regrowing after being cut. It is also important to remove the cut nettles and any other arisings.
- Some of the saplings and smaller trees in this area along with the lower branches of the larger trees could also be removed by bow saw to allow more light in.
- Thicker areas of scrub further away from the carrot wash which are thick with bramble and elm suckers can be left in favour of improving the habitat nearer to the carrot wash.



### **Surveys**

The Wildlife Trust will continue to monitor the water voles along the Potton Brook, particularly at the Henry Smith Playing Field to assess the impact of the habitat management works. We will provide the results of these surveys to the Potton Environment Group, Potton Town Council and the County Mammal Recorder.

### **Contact Information**

If you have any queries regarding managing sites for water voles please contact The Wildlife Trust on 01234 364 213 or email [Bedfordshire@wildlifebcn.org](mailto:Bedfordshire@wildlifebcn.org).