



Water voles: *Arvicola amphibius*

Water voles are shy and elusive rodents, and are one of our most endangered native mammals. They live in slow moving, fresh water, but as their numbers had sadly declined by more than 80% in the 1990's, they are now a fully protected species in law.

With a range of focused conservation measures, and huge amounts of work by ecologists, wildlife organisations and volunteers, their numbers have recovered in some areas. But they remain scarce and difficult to see, even in previous strongholds such as the River Wye. I was lucky enough to see and photograph this lovely vole, quietly munching on new waterside vegetation one late April, as I walked by the river into Bakewell.

They are very tidy when they eat, ensuring the stalks are free from mud before munching on it, and they hold the vegetation with dextrous, four fingered front paws. They need to eat about 80 per cent of their body weight every day, and adapt their mainly herbivorous diet to take advantage of the seasonal food available. They will eat berries that grow near water, and may also eat worms and small fish to supplement their green diet when pregnant.

Though competent swimmers, they do not have webbed feet, and because they have no waterproofing on their fur, they only stay in or under water for short periods to avoid getting a waterlogged coat.

Question: Can you identify four reasons why water voles became so endangered, and what can we all do to help their recovery?

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