

Water Vole Species Protection Plan



TG-NET-ENV-506	Water Vole Species Protection Plan		Applies to
			Transmission ✓
Revision: 1.02	Classification: Internal	Issue Date: December 2022	Review Date: December 2030

	Name	Title
Author	Francis Williams	Environmental Net Gain Manager
Checked by	Alistair Watson	Consents and Environment Manager
Approved by	Richard Baldwin	Head Of Environment

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1 Introduction

This Protection Plan provides guidance and agreed procedures for the protection of water voles and their shelters during construction works on Scottish Hydro Electric Transmission (SHE Transmission) projects. The Plan contains two parts and details the procedures that must be followed where there is potential for water vole to be present (Part 1), and where a Project Licence for water vole has been issued by NatureScot to cover the project (Part 2):

Part 1 : General Protection Plan

This Part applies to all projects where water vole may be present. Part 1 outlines the responsibilities of SHE Transmission and the *Contractor* regarding protection of water vole. It also details relevant legislation, survey requirements, general mitigation measures and the requirement for licensing and mitigation.

Part 2: Project Licence Protection Plan

This is provided to *Contractors* in addition to Part 1 for large projects where a Project Licence has been issued by NatureScot to cover the work and identifies those activities and mitigation measures which are permitted under the Project Licence and those activities which require a Method Statement to be submitted to NatureScot for written approval before works can commence. This Part should be followed in conjunction with Part 1 and the relevant Project Licence to provide approved guidance and the relevant Project Licence to provide approved guidance and methodologies for carrying out work.

2 References

The documents detailed in Table 2.1 – Miscellaneous Documents, below should be used in conjunction with this document

Table 2.1 – Miscellaneous Documents

Title
Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended in Scotland)
NatureScot Licensing

3 Part 1: General Protection Plan

3.1 Background

Water voles (*Arvicola amphibius*) are rat sized members of the rodent family which are found in habitats closely associated with waterways such as rivers and canals as well as upland areas of bog. In Scotland, they are absent from most of the islands and are under serious predation pressure from American mink (*Neovison vison*), which together with habitat loss have resulted in massive losses.

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They usually have black fur in Scotland as opposed to the brown form found in England and Wales and have a short hairy tail, small eyes, a stout body with a chubby face. As suggested by the name they swim frequently and are often first noticed as they noisily ‘plop’ into water. Water voles predominately eat sedges and rushes although they have been known to predate on fish and invertebrates. Tormentil (*Potentilla erecta*) is a favoured plant in upland areas.

Water voles do not hibernate, but are less active during the period October to Mid-March. Females actively defend exclusive territories particularly during the May – August breeding season, during which they have up to 5 litters. Males have not been shown to defend territories and have larger home ranges. In upland areas colonies are small and discrete with high levels of colony extinction and colonisation within a widely dispersed metapopulation.

Water vole colonies are generally found in habitats with the following characteristics:

- Watercourses with banks covered in tall grass or sedge vegetation and scrub tends to be avoided
- Wet areas in uplands (up to 1000 m asl) often some distance away from ‘typical’ riparian habitats

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Signs of Water Vole:

1. Latrines – home ranges are marked by latrines near nests, burrows and where they enter or leave water. Faeces are characteristically ‘tic-tac’ shaped about 12mm long and 4mm wide.
2. Prints and tracks – water vole footprints are star shaped with four toes on the forefeet and five on the hindfeet. 4 – 9 cm broad paths through vegetation near water can also be an indication of water vole activity.
3. Feeding remains / feeding stations – although these can be confused with other species, neat piles of grasses, sedges or reeds about 10 cm long cut cleanly at a 45° angle can be evidence of water voles.
4. Water vole burrows – normally entrances have a diameter of between 4 and 8 cm and can be either above or below the water level along banks of watercourses. They are generally found within 2 – 5 m of the water’s edge. but may be in places relatively far away from running water particularly in upland areas.

3.2 Responsibilities

It is the *Contractor’s* responsibility to comply with all the requirements of this Protection Plan where water vole may be present, and it is both the *Contractor’s* and SHE Transmission’s responsibility to monitor compliance with the Protection Plan. The responsibility for applying for any Licence, including a Project Licence, may vary from project to project, but all applications and mitigation works will adhere to this plan.

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3.3 Legislation

Water vole is afforded partial protection under Schedule 5 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, (as amended in Scotland), This legislation makes it an offence to recklessly¹:

- Damage or destroy or obstruct access to, any structure or place which any water vole uses for shelter or protection
- Disturb a water vole while it is occupying a structure or place which it uses for shelter or protection

This legislation means that water vole habitat is fully protected in Scotland.

NatureScot can grant licences to enable certain activities that would otherwise be an offence, to be carried out in relation to water voles and their burrows, subject to the following:

- a) that undertaking the conduct authorised by the Licence will give rise to, or contribute towards the achievement of, a significant social, economic or environmental benefit; and that there is no other satisfactory solution.

In granting a licence NatureScot has to take into account the consequences for water vole at a local population level, to assist this assessment NatureScot will need to see maps of the area of operations and also surrounding areas of suitable water vole habitat.

3.4 Surveying for Water Vole

1. Initial survey for water vole must be undertaken in all works areas containing suitable water vole habitat, a maximum of 12 months² prior to the works commencing (this includes site investigations) to allow for pre planning. In areas where water vole are identified additional pre-works survey must be carried out a maximum of 2 months prior to works commencing to ensure the availability of up-to-date information.
2. Survey must be carried out during the active season - between 1 April and 31 October (lowlands) and 1 May and 30 September (uplands) and ideally during the months of June, July or August.
3. Surveys must extend for a minimum of 10 m beyond working areas, including access tracks.
4. Surveys must be carried out by suitably qualified and experienced ecologists and will identify whether any water voles or places of shelter are likely to be affected by the works.

1.1

¹ Reckless acts would include not having or disregarding a mitigation plan aimed at protecting water vole resulting in damage, destruction or disturbance of any water vole place of shelter, or carrying out an activity which would result in an offence where the presence of water vole was foreknown.

² Note: Information from any previous surveys (e.g., surveys carried out to provide data for EIA or other Assessments) can be a useful guide to water vole activity in an area, particularly if burrows were recorded. However, surveys will always require to be updated if carried out more than 12 months prior to works commencing.

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5. Appropriate monitoring (e.g., the use of suitable camera traps) should be undertaken where required to determine if any place of shelter is being occupied.

3.5 Review of Water Vole Survey

Once a water vole survey has been carried out, the ecologist / ECoW should review the survey results, apply the mitigation hierarchy outlined below and decide if a Licence is required (either Individual or Project) for the works.

Construction teams should be advised of existing / new constraints, together with mitigation and licensing requirements by the ecologist / ECoW.

Relevant site documentation and project information sources should be updated with new and amended information on water vole constraints as it is produced, with changes communicated to appropriate staff immediately.

3.6 Mitigation Hierarchy

There is a general presumption against works being carried out which could disturb water voles in their burrows or to destroy an occupied burrow. A hierarchical approach to mitigation of Avoidance - Disturbance - Destruction will be applied to any burrow that may be affected by works (See Figure 3.1).

Avoidance

This is the preferred option for occupied burrows identified within 10 metres of works. A protection zone of 10 metres should be marked and signed on the ground around each burrow or group of burrows with appropriate material to restrict work access.

All works personnel, machinery, vehicles and storage of materials must be restricted from entering.

Protection zones must be maintained until works are completed. Site staff should be briefed of their purpose through a Toolbox Talk and works micro-sited outwith the protection zone. If water vole disturbance can be avoided in this way, there is no need to obtain a Licence from NatureScot for the works.

Disturbance

For works within 10 metres of occupied burrows which cannot be avoided, a Licence for disturbance from NatureScot will be required (either Individual or Project).

Individual Licence applications to NatureScot should be accompanied by a Species Protection Plan which outlines how disturbance will be minimised and burrows protected, for example through screening of works and modifying protection zones.

If a Project Licence is in place, the methodology detailed in Part 2 of this document must be followed.

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Displacement of water vole and destruction of burrows

In some instances, displacement of water vole for example by close strimming around burrows, followed by destruction of burrows may be necessary to allow works to go ahead. This work will always require a licence for disturbance and burrow destruction from NatureScot (either individual or project). These actions must only be undertaken as a last resort and when there is no alternative. This methodology is only likely to be effective if proposed displacement distances are less than 50 metres, and only acceptable where an experienced ecologist has confirmed that there is suitable alternative habitat for water vole burrows within 50 meters of the original burrow location. Displacement work and destruction of burrows will not be licensed during the inactive or breeding periods. Suitable times for displacement work to be carried out is as follows: late February to early April (lowlands) and late March and April (uplands). Individual Licence applications to NatureScot must be accompanied by a Species Protection Plan which outlines timings of works, how impacts to water vole will be minimised, individuals protected, and loss of burrows compensated for.

If a Project Licence is in place, a Method Statement must be submitted to NatureScot in accordance with Part 2 of this document for written approval prior to any works commencing.

Any water vole place of shelter subject to works under a Licence must be monitored during and after those works.

Live trapping and translocation of water vole, and destruction of burrows

This is a last resort action, and a justification will be required as to why there is no alternative to translocation. This work will need significant pre-planning, and the identification of a receptor site for displaced animals. If this situation is likely to arise NatureScot Licensing Team should be contacted at the earliest opportunity to discuss timings, methodologies and licensing. This work will require an individual licence from NatureScot.

3.7 Mitigation Measures

3.7.1 General Mitigation

1. The ECoW will attend site on a regular basis throughout the construction period to ensure all environmental mitigation relevant to water vole is delivered.
2. All works in proximity to waterbodies / watercourses must follow measures outlined in the project environmental information and Contractors Environmental Management Plan (EMP) to ensure their protection against pollution, silting and erosion.
3. An emergency procedure will be implemented by site workers if signs of water vole (e.g., latrines or animals) are encountered. All work within 10 metres will cease, and the ECoW will inspect the site and define mitigation (if required) in line with this SPP.
4. An exceptional circumstance procedure will be implemented should mitigation options not prove satisfactory in a particular case. In such a scenario, works will be halted whilst mitigation is determined on a case specific basis under consultation with NatureScot.

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3.7.2 Monitoring and Reporting

1. The Environmental Representative will attend site on a regular basis throughout the construction period to ensure all environmental mitigation relevant to water vole is delivered.
2. Reports will be submitted to NatureScot as required by the relevant Licence.

3.8 Project Licence

A NatureScot Project Licence is likely to be the most appropriate form of Licence for any large scale and / or long running Project, which may result in a large number of minor unavoidable water vole offences. For example, multiple instances of disturbance to a number of water vole shelters over several years. A Project Licence can be used to standardise protected species mitigation / compensation, creating consistency across the project area and throughout the Project's lifespan. Project Licences do not negate the need for thorough pre-construction survey within 12 months of the planned project start date, and additional pre-construction survey within 2 months of works commencing, in areas where water voles have been found to be present. Any Project Licence application will need to be accompanied by a Mitigation / Compensation Plan and procedures for water vole included in Parts 1 and 2 of this SPP.

3.9 Individual Licence

For small scale Projects expected to be completed over relatively short timescales, which will result in a low number of unavoidable water vole offences an Individual NatureScot Licence is most likely to be appropriate. Licence applications should be accompanied by a Method Statement / Mitigation Plan and should be sent sufficiently in advance of the Project start date to ensure the licence is in place prior to work commencing. Further guidance and details of how to apply for a water vole licence can be found on the NatureScot website www.nature.scot/professional-advice/protected-areas-and-species/licensing/species-licensing-z-guide/water-voles-and-licensing

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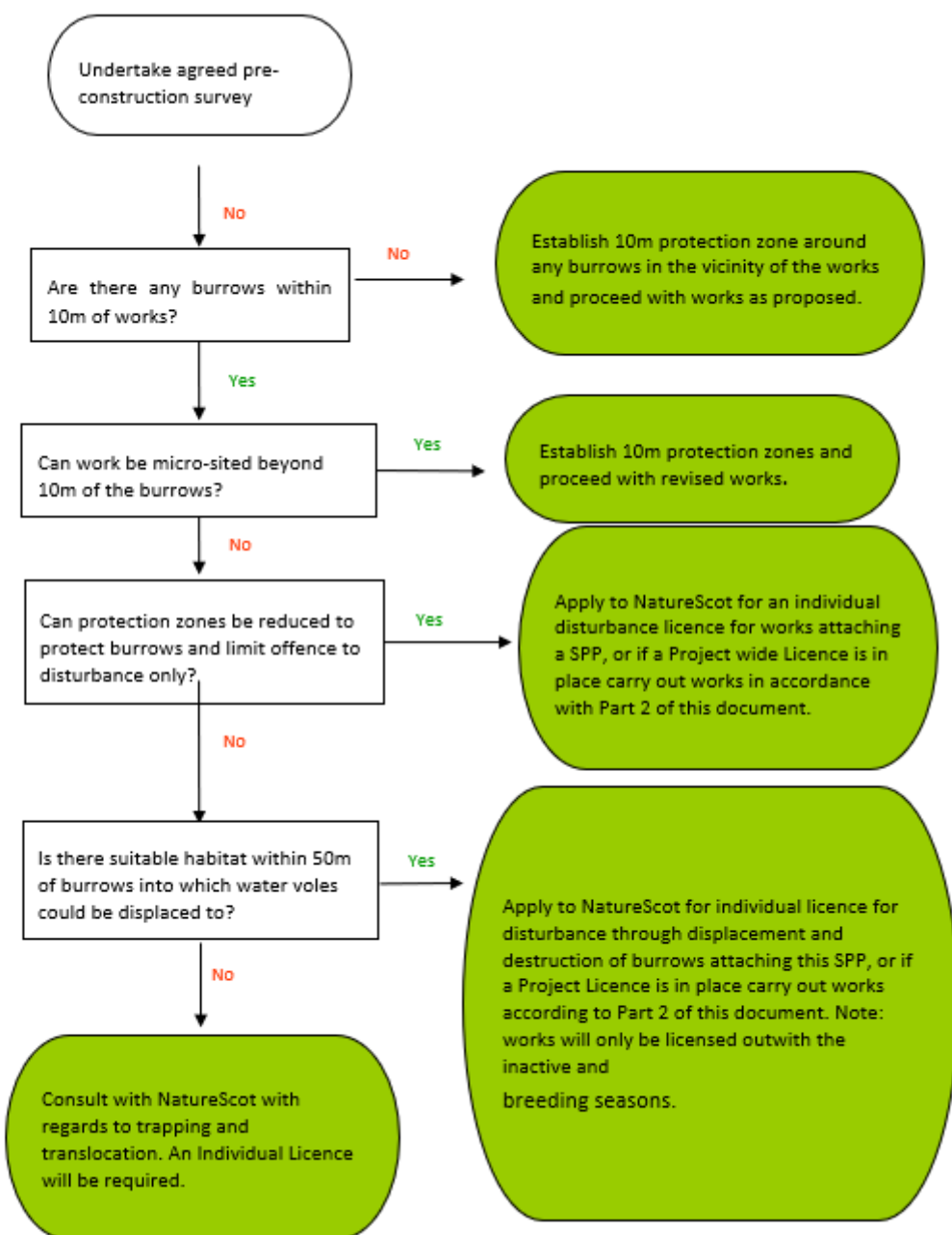


Figure 3.1 - Water Vole Decision Tree

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4 Part 2: Project Licence Protection Plan

The following sections of this plan are to be read in conjunction with the Project Licence (**insert Licence number**) and its conditions.

As stated in the Project Licence, methodologies for certain mitigation activities permitted under the Licence are included in this Part of the SPP. More disruptive activities, listed in Section 1 below, will also require a specific Method Statement to be submitted to NatureScot Licensing Team for written approval (see Appendix A). It is the *Contractor's* responsibility to submit these Method Statements to both SHE Transmission and NatureScot for written approval. No works shall proceed without this written approval.

Sufficient time should be allowed for in the programme to carry out any consultation work and obtain necessary approvals.

The Project Licence will specify reporting requirements detailing all disturbance and destruction works carried out.

In advance of, and during construction at any location where there is the potential for a water vole to be present, it is **essential** that this plan is followed:

4.1 Works Allowed under the Project Licence

The following works may be carried out under this SPP without further approval from NatureScot, using the prescribed methodologies:

Disturbance to water voles in their places of shelter

- a. In situations where it is not possible to maintain a 10 metres protection zone around a water vole burrow / place of shelter to avoid disturbance (*e.g.*, upgrade of an existing track or watercourse crossing; or construction of temporary track or watercourse crossing), but it is possible to establish a smaller protection zone (no less than 5 metres in radius) which will prevent damage or destruction of the burrows. The ECoW must mark out the reduced protection zone on the ground using appropriate marking materials and signage and ensure that it remains in place for the duration of the adjacent works.
- b. The ECoW must undertake a Toolbox Talk with all contractors before the start of works to raise awareness of the presence of water vole, locations of, and restrictions posed by protection zones and any required mitigation.
- c. During the construction works the ECoW must ensure that no plant and/or work personnel enter the protection zone.
- d. All construction works within a 10 metres radius of water vole places of shelter must usually be completed within 1 day. Working methods must be adopted to reduce any unnecessary disturbance including the following:
 - No parking of any plant or other vehicles
 - No site compounds or welfare facilities

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- No use of static plant and/or generators
 - Artificial lighting, if required, is to be directed away from water vole habitat and riparian habitats in general
 - No potential activities that may result in pollution, *e.g.*, re-fuelling, will be allowed within the protection zone. Silt control measures will be agreed prior to works with the ECoW to ensure no adverse impact on water vole habitat.
- e. Use of any constructed tracks will not be subject to any subsequent restrictions on use.

4.2 Activities requiring a NatureScot Approved Method Statement

The following works require a Method Statement to be approved in writing by NatureScot Licensing Team before works can commence:

1. Displacement of water vole and destruction of burrows. Please note these activities will only be licensed to take place at the following times: late February to early April (lowlands) or late March and April (uplands) to avoid inactive and breeding periods.
2. Translocation, live trapping and destruction of burrows. Please note these activities will only be licensed to take place during March and April to avoid inactive and breeding periods.

The Method Statement template in Appendix A has been developed in conjunction with NatureScot and should be used by the Contractor / Named Agent for all submissions.

Proposed mitigation works should be agreed with NatureScot.

5 Revision History

No	Overview of Amendment	Previous Document	Revision	Authorisation
01	Transfer to new template and Nomenclature	TG-PS-LT-719 (Rev 1.00)	1.00	Richard Baldwin
02	Weblinks updated, typos corrected, and decision tree corrected	TG-PS-LT-719 (Rev 1.00)	1.01	Richard Baldwin
03	Transfer to New Template. Updates relating to NatureScot and simplification of legislation.	TG-NET-ENV-506 (Rev 1.01)	1.02	Richard Baldwin
04				

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Appendix A Project Licence Method Statement Template

<PROJECT TITLE>

METHOD STATEMENT FOR WORKS UNDER *(insert licence details)*

<insert species record reference>

<insert date>

Introduction

This document, prepared on behalf of SHE Transmission provides a Method Statement for *<insert details of works>* to be completed under *<insert licence details>*. These works are required in order to facilitate the delivery of the *<insert Project details>* (the Project).

Condition *<insert No.>* of the above Licence states that a *<insert species>* Protection Method Statement be submitted to (NatureScot) Licensing Team for written approval, under specific circumstances, prior to commencement of works which could affect *<insert species>*. Therefore, no works which would *<insert licensed activity>* *<insert species>* shall take place without written confirmation of NatureScot approval of this method statement.

This Method Statement makes reference to the following documents:

<insert licence details>, NatureScot

Species Protection Plan (SPP): *<insert SPP No. and title>* Rev. X *<insert date>*

Further information is provided in Table 1: Summary of Data.

Licensable Works

Introduction

<Insert details>

Baseline Description

<Insert description, including photographs / location plan>

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Table 1: Summary of Data

Reference	Easting	Northing	Date recorded	Description	Date works exclusion zone demarcated & distance

Survey Summary

<Insert details>

Description of the Proposed Licensable Works

<Insert details>

Works Duration

<Insert details>

Consideration of Alternatives

<Insert details>

Impact Assessment

<Insert details>

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Method Statement Site Briefing (to be delivered to relevant staff prior to works)

Site: *<insert description>*

Reference number: *<insert species record reference>*

Client: SHE Transmission

Task: *<insert description of works>*

Prepared by: *<insert individual or Company name>*

Licensed Agent: *<insert name>*

Method statement for *<insert works description>*

Before works commence:

All relevant personnel will be made aware of the presence and location of the constraint and mitigation.

<insert details of methodology>

During works:

<insert details of methodology>

<Insert Contractor's name>

I, the undersigned, confirm receipt of this method statement and fully understand and agree to work to the conditions therein.

Signature of Contractor's Representative:..... Date ../ /

Print name in full:
