

RATTY'S BACK IN BLEADON

Mole's dear friend Rat was in fact a water vole, and they have been having a hard time over the past century. A survey in 2004 shows the UK's population as falling 90-95% over the last 50 years; a pretty drastic decline. This was largely due to habitat destruction, pollution and mink. Since then they have been adopted under the Government's Biodiversity Action Plan, and in April 2008 were given greater protection under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended). Water voles and their habitats must now be considered in planning applications, and it is a legal offence to damage, destroy or obstruct access to any structure or place which water voles use for shelter or protection, or to disturb water voles while they are using such a place.

So things are finally looking up for Ratty!

In fact, so much so that they have been regularly seen or heard 'plopping' in and out of the rhynes surrounding Bleadon's fields. Take a walk on a quiet Sunday afternoon and you may be lucky enough to see one cropping a neat lawn surrounding its burrow, or hear it 'plop' into the water and see one swimming – a short, brown, furry tail making it easily distinguishable in the water from a rat.

Unlike a rat, the paws and ears are also covered in fur.

The best description I could find for a water vole goes thus:

“A water vole looks like rat that has been transfigured (in Professor McGonagall's class, presumably!) into a teddy bear, but got stuck halfway. The face is round and fat and charming...As champagne goes straight to the pleasure centres, so the sight of these little creatures goes straight to the endearment centres of the brain.”

In the absence of Ratty himself, a water vole's burrow can be identified by his living habits. Aside from the giveaway hole in the bank, water voles like a well stocked larder. That is, plenty of fresh vegetation growing nearby. If your eyes are good enough, they will nearly always have a neatly cropped patch of grass and reeds surrounding their burrow,

and a well trodden path leading to their latrine (the contents of which, as I can tell you from numerous water vole surveys, is small, green and rather pleasant smelling!).

In conservation terms, over the past five years they have increased in numbers and moved out of the 'Endangered' category but are still 'Threatened'. We are very lucky to have these endearing creatures back in the village, and in making sure our rhynes are kept clean and well maintained we can ensure that they continue to breed here.

So, as Mole cried before setting off on the journey that took him to Ratty's place on the riverside;

“Hang spring-cleaning!” Get out to the rhynes at the heart of our village and take a look.



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