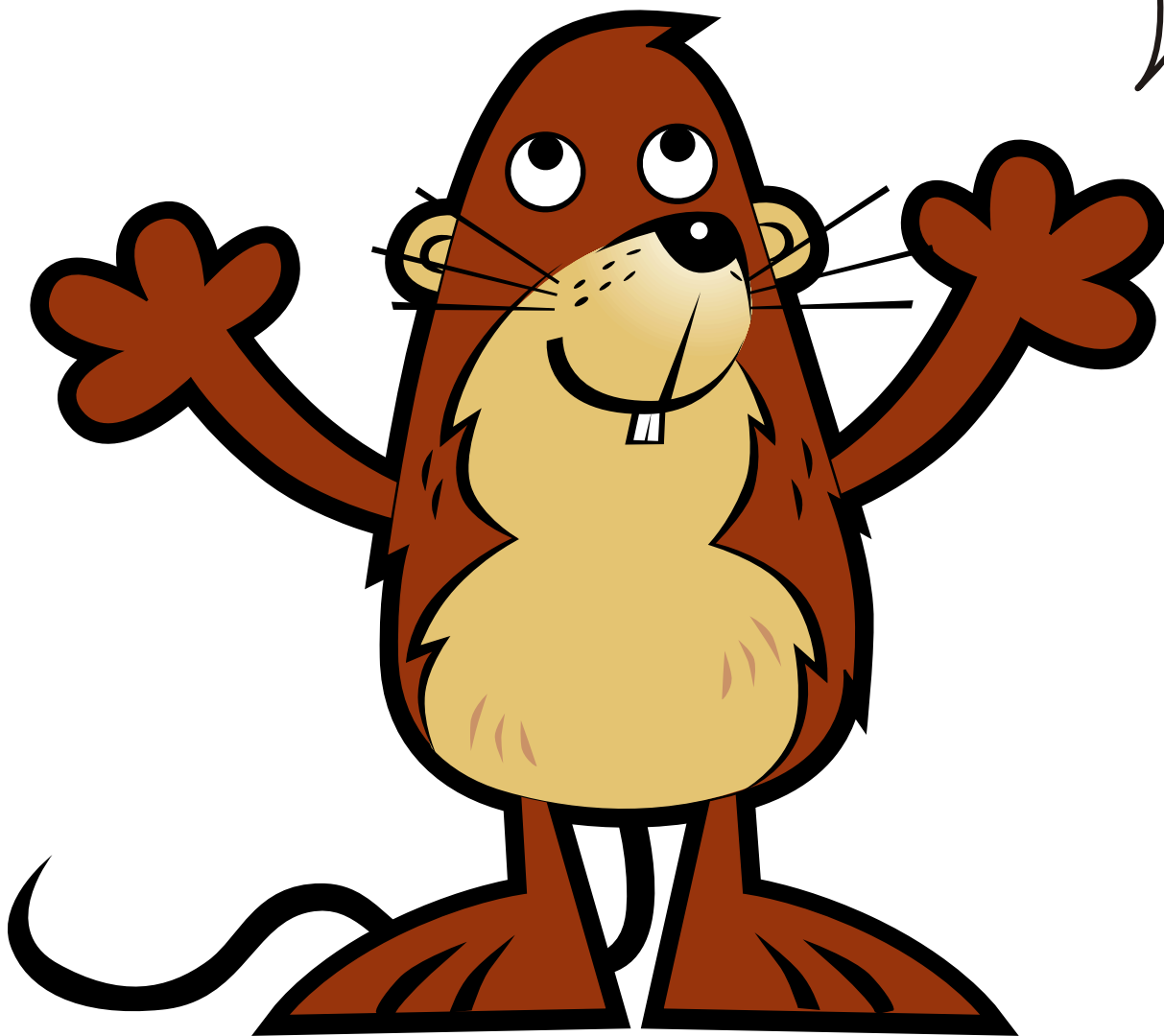


People are always getting shrews mixed up with voles. I am a shrew but read on to find out about some of my friends, the water voles.



Source sheet A
Water Voles



Water voles were once a common sight on Britain's waterways. However, the water vole population has dropped dramatically over the last 50 years. Now they are a protected species.

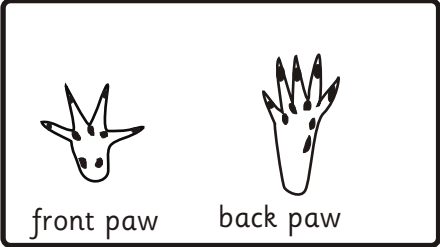
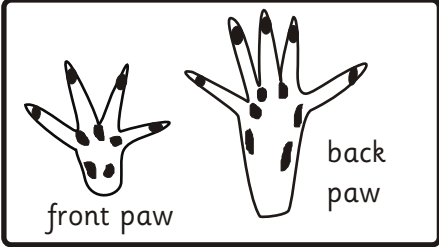
Water voles are mammals. They are herbivores and they feed on the many plants found by the side of the water. They are usually very active during the day and can often be seen swimming in the water.

One of the biggest threats to the water vole population in Britain is the mink. The mink is not a native animal of Britain but since it was introduced from North America its numbers have increased. Now the mink is the main predator of the water vole.

Have you read 'Wind in the Willows' by Kenneth Graham?

Did you know that the character Ratty is actually a water vole?

Water voles are the largest species of vole. Although they are often called 'water rats' they aren't rats at all and are quite different to them. Read the differences listed in the table below.

	Water Vole	Brown Rat
Mass	200 - 350g	Up to 400g
Head	Blunter muzzle, smaller eyes, more rounded and less obvious ears.	Pointed muzzle, larger eyes, more obvious ears.
Tail	Furry tail, just over half as long as its body.	Tail looks naked or scaly and is much longer.
Tracks	 <p>front paw back paw</p>	 <p>front paw back paw</p>

Water Voles - Signs to look for

Although water voles are shy mammals they can often be seen during the day and there are several signs to look for.



Droppings: 1cm long, 0.5cm wide, cylindrical, greeny - black. When they are fresh they don't smell. The droppings usually mark the edge of the water vole's territory.



Burrows: The burrows often look like a series of holes along the water's edge. The entrances are usually 4 - 8 cm wide.

The 'plop': The water vole makes a distinctive 'plopping' sound when it dives into the water. Listen out for it when you are near the waterways.

Feeding Stations: Water voles leave small, neat piles of chewed strips of plants at their favourite feeding spots. These are often near the water's edge or near pathways between burrows.

Lawns: Well cropped 'lawns' can sometimes be found near vertical burrow entrances. When a female water vole has her young she can not spend much time away from the nest and so eats the plants close to it.