



TAILS ON THE RIVERBANK



This otter picture (left) sent by York visitor Jon Noble and published on our website and Facebook page had hundreds of “likes” and also appeared in the York Press. But what do we know about otters and other mammals on the Foss?

Until recently otters were in sharp decline, probably due to pesticides in their prey, habitat destruction, and persecution - often wrongly - for taking

prey such as game and poultry when mink may be the culprits. Since receiving protection under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 they’ve made a comeback and are now found in nearly every English county. However, they’re still listed as Near Threatened on the global IUCN Red List.

Otters can live for 5-10 years and need clean rivers with abundant food and vegetation. Fish make up 80% of their diet, but they’ll take waterbirds, amphibians and crustaceans if fish are scarce. It’s when they can’t find enough food in the river that otters start to predate fish in lakes and garden ponds, to the understandable annoyance of the owners. If our river systems were better managed they could sustain enough fish and wildlife to feed the otters and leave enough for anglers.

The bonus to having otters on a river is the control of mink, which were imported in the 1920s and bred for their fur. Over the years some escaped or were released, multiplied and by 2000 covered the whole country. They live for 10–12 years and can have 4–6 young a year. Their diet is wide-ranging and, like otters, they will predate fish in lakes or ponds. They’re a threat to all wildlife, including water voles, entering their burrows and taking the young. Unlike the otter, mink will kill when not hungry.

The decline in otters enabled mink to thrive. However,



This mink was seen cheekily strolling on the landing behind Hungate

as otters have started to recover, mink have declined in the same areas. In addition to being displaced, and sometimes even killed, by otters, mink are also being trapped by naturalists trying to save the water vole from extinction.

We know there are mink on the Foss and have had meetings with City of York Council, who now say they’re prepared to organise trapping if we can tell them the location of dens.

Water voles live for 1–1.5 years. Vegetarians, they live along rivers, streams and ditches, around ponds and lakes, and in marshes, reedbeds and areas of wet moor-



A water vole seen in New Earswick

land. They start to breed in spring, having 3-4 litters a year of up to 5 young.

Water voles have suffered one of the most serious declines of any wild mammal in Britain because of pollution and

habitat loss, but most of all due to predation by mink in the 1980s and 90s, when the population fell by almost 90 per cent. Like the otter, they’re now a protected species, and a Priority Species under the UK Post-2010 Biodiversity Framework.

2020 is the third year of the RFS water vole project. Between York and Strensall we have been launching “vole rafts” in conjunction with St. Nicks. The idea is that voles will climb onto the rafts to feed, and they’re inspected regularly for vole poo. Believe it or not, this is a tried and tested method and does work – signs were spotted near Earswick last year. Alas, high water often spells disaster for voles, flooding their burrows and drowning the young, though the adults are often able to escape. Hopefully they’ll be back on the Foss this year.

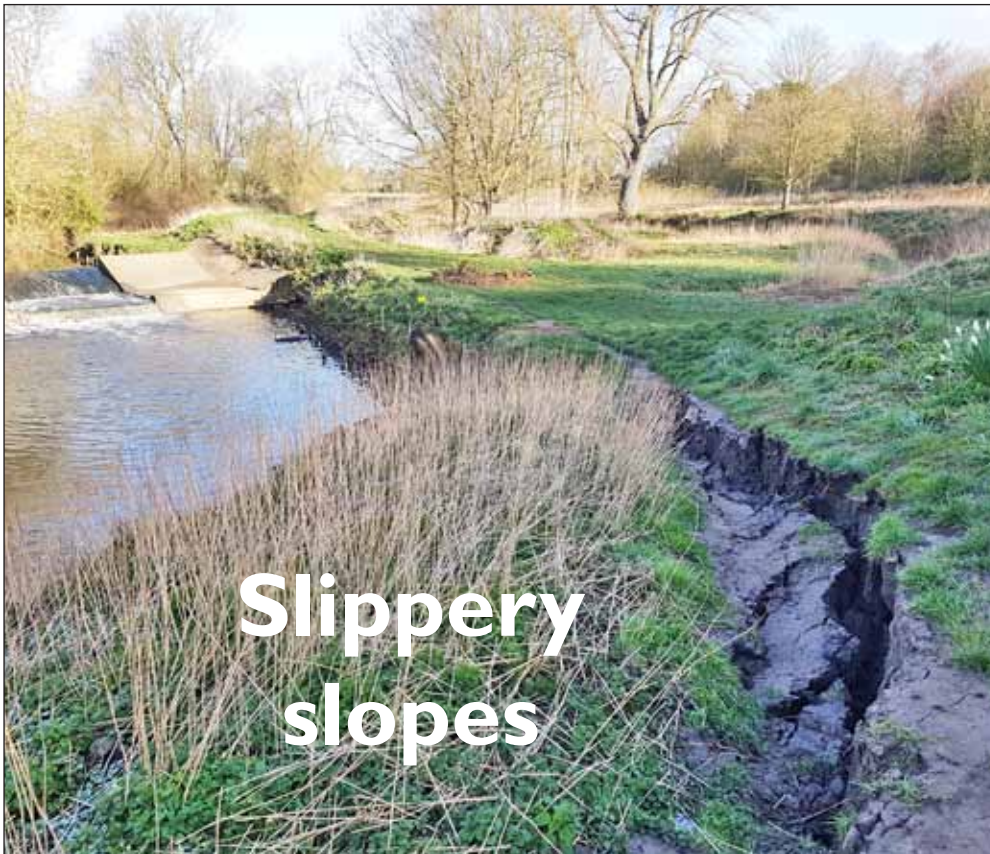


The water vole project

For more information on these mammals, see our website.

Sources: The Otter Trust; The Wildlife Trusts.

Alison Scott



Slippery slopes

Committee member Bill Twist spotted this imminent bank collapse by Haxby Weir. It had clearly been exacerbated by high water levels, in February.

It is on a bend and has been slowly slumping for a while, but the large crack is recent.

The Internal Drainage Board has been contacted, and we await action, as this slippage has the potential to be dangerous.



River Foss Society members were on a boat trip on the Calder & Hebble Navigation in July 2018 when we passed a place near Cooper Bridge where unfortunately a 42 year old man and his 19 year old son had been drowned when magnet fishing on 12 June 2018 – the first time most participants had heard of “magnet fishing” ! [Cooper Bridge is the C&H junction with the Huddersfield Broad Canal leading to the Huddersfield Narrow Canal which goes through the Pennines by the famous Standedge Tunnel, a trip done by RFS members in July 2017].

Magnet fishing means searching in rivers and canals for objects available to be pulled by rope with a strong (neodymium) magnet. There is no single law that says magnet fishing is illegal. It is subject to local regulations but it is illegal to remove any material from a river

A strong attraction!

(such as the River Ouse) or inland navigation under the control of the Canal & River Trust. The navigation authority for the lower River Foss is the City of York Council – hence it being responsible for Castle Mills Lock.

In recent years magnet fishing as treasure hunting has become an increasingly popular hobby with an element of helping the environment. However, it is fraught with danger, as above.

It appears to have been happening at or near to Castle Mills Lock as the photograph shows - this explains why a number of bicycles, shopping trolleys and other metallic objects have been found on the banks of the River Foss between Castle Mills Bridge and Blue Bridge. Waiting for the scrap merchant?

Peter Hopwood

Don't forget our website:

www.riverfossociety.co.uk

A threatened resident

White-clawed Crayfish are the UK's only native freshwater crayfish but their numbers have plummeted in recent years due to the spread of American Signal Crayfish (*Pacifastacus leniusculus*). This trans-Atlantic invader was introduced in the 1970s to UK waters to be farmed for export to the lucrative Scandinavian market. The crayfish plague had ravaged native crayfish populations in Europe and it was seen as an attractive commercial species. Its escape was first recorded in the south east of England in 1975 and it has been slowly spreading across our rivers and streams, outcompeting our native crayfish, ever since. Signal Crayfish are more aggressive (taking over refuges), grow faster, and are much less fussy eaters (depleting food sources) than the native white-clawed variety, and they also burrow into river banks, destabilising them. Combine this with the fact they carry a 'crayfish plague' (a fungal parasite) which is particularly deadly to our white-clawed residents while having little effect on themselves, and you can see why we have a problem.



*The white-clawed crayfish. Photo: David Gerke / CC BY-SA
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0>)*

Identification features of signal crayfish include red undersides to their claws, a greenish brown upper surface and orange/red undersides. They can grow to be 16-18 centimetres in size.

In contrast, the white-clawed crayfish is brown to olive in colour and the undersides of its claws are usually whitish rather than red. The white-clawed crayfish is also much smaller in size, only growing to a maximum of 12 centimetres.

White-clawed crayfish prefer clean unpolluted rivers and streams, no deeper than 1 metre, which have plenty of suitable refuges. These refuges are essential for crayfish of all ages, but particularly for juveniles which are especially vulnerable to predation by fish, ducks, other water birds, otters and mink, as well as carnivorous dragonfly larvae. That's a lot of hungry creatures to protect themselves against. Adult crayfish can use their front claws to protect themselves against smaller predators but that doesn't help them against bigger more aggressive species such as perch and eels, and birds such as herons.

The Foss, having a relatively isolated catchment, has been lucky in that, at least in its upper reaches, it is relatively unpolluted and is still fairly natural, with lots of very old alder trees sprawling across the banks both above and below the water. Many of the banks have

undercuts which provide a perfect refuge for crayfish. The presence in these upper reaches of White-clawed Crayfish was shown in 2017 via a survey, commissioned by the RFS thanks to a grant from the Two Ridings Community Foundation, carried out by wetland ecologist Martin Hammond, but the full extent of their presence was uncertain.

In the autumn of 2019, thanks to funding from the Postcode Local Trust, St Nicks was able to assist Martin Hammond in a further survey of these upper reaches of the river to find out more about "our" white-clawed crayfish population. Martin has a licence to survey for crayfish and has been passing on his wealth of knowledge and skills to St Nicks with the hope that they can get their own licence to survey soon.

Jonathan Dent, St Nicks Natural Habitats Manager and long-term friend and supporter of the RFS, said of the survey "We eagerly followed Martin's instructions as we made our way into the river in waders, complete with

nets and trays for surveying. We quickly learnt what made a good crayfish refuge (for example undercuts in the banks, build-up of leaf litter and mature tree roots crossing under the water) and we were soon turning out crayfish after crayfish into trays. We found a good range of both male and female including large seasoned veterans with misshaped claws, young soft-shelled adults having just moulted and tiny juveniles which were often near impossible to see amongst the leaf litter. Over two survey sessions we recorded large and healthy populations of crayfish, extending the known distribution about 1.5 km downstream of previous records. The upper Foss is a lot more natural in its habitat than the rest of the river and it will be interesting to continue surveys further downstream next year to see if the populations extend further. A really nice good news story for a change when it comes to our rivers!"

The River Foss survey work is part of the Dales to Vales Rivers Network Catchment Management Plan. St Nicks has been working with the River Foss Society to train and support volunteers in conducting a range of projects including riparian mammals and walkover surveys. Once the current crisis has abated, we will look together at conducting freshwater invertebrate surveys.

The findings from all these surveys will build up a picture of the current state of the river and show us what potential there is to make habitat improvements in the future. Our aim to increase biodiversity all along the river.

Mike Gray

Finding a solution



As reported in our Winter 2019/20 Newsletter, the trees growing out of the canal wall next to "Old Humpy" at Strensall have been cut down.

To prevent further growth of the tree roots the exposed trunks have been drilled and treated with glyphosate plugs. This has been achieved by drilling 13mm holes in the trunk and inserting plugs 6 to 7cm apart. Some 400 plugs were fitted and 57 trunks were treated in this way.

This method, clearly labour intensive, is certainly neater and more environmentally friendly than spraying them with glyphosate, which could find its way into the river and damage wildlife. This work will help to prevent the collapse of the lock wall and preserve the heritage of the canal era.

The work was carried out by a local tree surgeon and the cost, approximately £450, funded equally by Strensall Parish Council and the Robert Wilkinson Trust who are the owners of the property. The society wish to thank both those two organisations for their generous help and contribution to the project.

John Millett



Top: The lock wall had been damaged by trees growing out of it for years

Below and bottom: Some of the 400 plugs put in cut trunks



When this is all over ...
The Foss will still be there!
Stay home and stay safe!

On the Foss

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Did you know that the River Foss Society is on Facebook too?