



Tales of the Reed Beds

Protecting the habitat of the water vole, best known in fiction as 'Ratty' in *Wind in the Willows*, was a prime focus when the Authority was designing a minewater treatment scheme, which has recently been completed at Hockery Brook, south of Wigan.

As plans were drawn up to build a major reedbed scheme, which would bring great environmental benefits to the area, special attention was paid to the flora and fauna which inhabit the watercourse. Water voles, which are a protected species, were known to be living in the top section of the Hockery Brook.

Water voles are protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, as amended by the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, and it is an offence to recklessly damage, destroy or obstruct access to any structure or place which water voles use for shelter or protection.

Legal protection is given to water vole habitat because the loss of suitable habitat is the main reason for the dramatic reduction in their numbers.

"During the planning process we held extensive consultations with all interested parties, including the ecologist at Wigan Council, the Environment Agency and English Nature," says Alistair Byfield, Project Manager in the Authority's Estates and Environmental Projects Team.

"It was important to cause as little disturbance as possible to the animals and their habitat during the period that earthworks were taking place to build the reed beds and lagoons, which have been put in place to improve the water quality of the Hockery Brook."

As a temporary measure, strimming of bankside vegetation took place and an area was fenced off to encourage the water voles to relocate to an area downstream, which had longer grass. This work was monitored by ecologists.

As part of the final scheme, a water vole net was buried a metre deep in the ground to ensure that the water voles remained in their natural habitat and did not stray into the lined ponds which have been created as part of the minewater treatment scheme.

"Although they generally prefer to stay out of sight, voles can jump and dig so it was necessary to install the net to prevent them from burrowing their way out," adds Alistair Byfield.

Measures have also been put in place to ensure that the treated water is discharged into the watercourse as close as possible to its collection point to minimise the length of the brook which is affected by the scheme.

Operation Orchid

A group of 80 rare orchids was translocated to different parts of the site when the Authority constructed a minewater treatment scheme at Aspull Sough between Wigan and Bolton.



A close relative of the rat and mouse, the water vole can be distinguished from either of them by its blunt snout, tiny ears and short tail. Measuring about eight inches long, it lives along the banks of canals, slow moving rivers, lakes and marshes.

The water vole has a home territory based on a burrow, the entrance to which is sometimes just below the surface of the water. One sign of its whereabouts is a patch of the bank where the plants have been bitten off. It likes to swim underwater and, after swimming, often sits upright on the bankside, feeding on a plant or washing its face.