

Making Bishops Stortford a home for 'Ratty'

The Environment Agency is working in partnership with the *Waterside Stortford Group on an exciting project to improve habitat for water voles and encourage them to make new homes on the Stort Navigation in Bishops Stortford.

Water voles are the UK's largest vole species, made famous by 'Ratty' from *Wind in the Willows*, who despite his name, is actually a water vole. Sadly, they are also one of the UK's fastest declining native mammals. Due to habitat loss and the invasive American mink, they have disappeared from many of the places they used to call home.

Kate Nixon, Biodiversity Officer at the Environment Agency, said:

This fantastic partnership project will see a 60-metre stretch of pre-planted coir rolls installed along the toe of a steep bank close to the Goods Yard footbridge. We'll also be adding bankside vegetation to provide a source of food and cover, allowing water voles to safely move along riverbanks protected from predators.

Through this exciting venture we're very much looking forward to seeing the return of Ratty and friends once more in Bishops Stortford.

The project team will be installing 'coir rolls' along the bankside. These are cylinders made of sustainable waste product from coconut husk contained in a net.

The project will see the improvement of water vole habitat to encourage them to settle on the Stort Navigation

Coir rolls are dual purpose, protecting riverbanks from erosion and providing habitat. They can be planted with established wetland plants before they are installed to provide immediate habitat. These will be pre-planted with a 'water vole-friendly' plant mix, which will also enhance the existing habitat. This work can also benefit waterfowl, providing cover and nesting opportunities.

Where rivers or canals flow through towns, there's less vegetation, hampering the water vole's ability to safely migrate along the river corridor. The project will also help to protect the bank from erosion and in turn protect the towpath.

Hopefully this project will mirror the successful reintroduction project by

Essex Wildlife Trust and Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust, who in 2015 helped to re-establish a water vole population on the Stort, downstream of Bishops Stortford at Thorley Wash nature reserve.

*The Waterside Stortford Group is run by Bishops Stortford Town Council and the Canal and River Trust.

The project is being funded by the Waterside Stortford Group and the installation will be carried out by volunteers from Canal and River Trust with support from staff from the Canal and River Trust and the Environment Agency.

The works are due to take place on 9 and 10 March 2022, weather and river conditions permitting.