

Lynne Farrell Group Award winner

Essex Wildlife Trust River Wardens

In 2007 Essex Wildlife Trust established the Riversearch otter and water vole survey. Riversearch surveys involve training volunteer surveyors to recognise field signs and monitor a set stretch of river annually for otter, water vole and mink signs. Riversearch volunteers have tracked the spread of otters and water voles as they have re-established themselves in Essex catchments; and monitored the presence of American Mink, resulting in a comprehensive dataset of riverine protected species for Essex which is held by the Essex Wildlife Trust Biological Records Centre and shared with the NBN Gateway. The online version of the Riversearch survey is being launched in 2016, as is a county-wide mink monitoring database to enable monitoring effort to be compared with species presence across Essex, and to speed up data flow.

In February 2014 the Riversearch volunteer network was expanded to include Riverfly monitoring and river condition surveys, as part of a wider Essex Wildlife Trust River Warden scheme. In addition to the initial 200 trained volunteers, a network of over 170 volunteer wardens has been established, monitoring 16 river catchments in Essex. River Wardens monitor river quality via freshwater invertebrate sampling; and take part in targeted invasive and protected species surveys to fill in gaps in our existing knowledge of the distribution of these species in Essex. In addition to this they patrol their stretch of river regularly and report problems or any unusual activity, acting as an early warning system for potential pollution incidents and highlighting areas of improvement.

The benefits of this scheme have been far reaching. As well as contributing to the national Riverfly monitoring scheme, Wardens are also alerting us to pollution events, and to the presence of species such as Brook Lamprey, resulting in the first new records of this species on the NBN Gateway for Essex in 10 years! Volunteer effort is coordinated via the Essex Rivers Hub, a partnership website developed as a source of information on all river and coastal projects in Essex (see <http://www.essexrivershub.org.uk/>). Volunteers have gone above and beyond what EWT have asked them, by getting together to organise litter picks and invasive species removal (Himalayan Balsam) and even organising social events such as canoe trips along their local river.

Since establishing and organising this amazing group of people, the benefits of what they can achieve have been recognised by the Environment Agency and water companies, as the Wardens have reported incidents such as broken pipes before they became a major problem. The River Wardens also work with Rivercare and other local organisations including canoe and angling clubs to promote data sharing and participation in the scheme to a wide audience that was not previously engaged with biological recording. This approach has been so successful it is now used as an exemplar in other areas, and has even featured on the BBC's Countryfile! Essex River Wardens contributed 2,500 volunteer hours in 2015, and the scheme is continuing to grow, being set to expand to coastal areas in 2016.