

Water voles return to Ewell

31 July 2025



Once extinct in the county, the much-loved water vole has today (30th July) made an historic return to the Upper Hogsmill in Epsom & Ewell. This milestone is the result of a pioneering wetland restoration project led by the South East Rivers Trust (SERT) and reintroduction project by rewilding organisation Citizen Zoo, with support from Wildwood Trust, Natural England Species Recovery Programme, Thames Water and Epsom & Ewell Borough Council.

Around 50 water voles were released onto the Hogsmill river and Chamber Meads wetland this morning at a celebratory event. This was the culmination of many years of work by the South East Rivers Trust, Epsom & Ewell Borough Council, Citizen Zoo, and partners to restore the river and create the new wetland habitat. The return of this endangered species marks a major milestone for Surrey's biodiversity and one of the most exciting rewilding projects in the region.

"Water voles were once a familiar sight on the Hogsmill, but due to habitat loss and invasive predators, they died out. Now, after years of dedicated river restoration work, and the creation of the flagship wetland at Chamber Mead, as well as extensive monitoring by a band of dedicated local volunteers-, we're thrilled to have brought them back to the upper Hogsmill in Surrey," said **Dr Bella Davies**, CEO of the South East Rivers Trust.

The **Wildwood Trust**, based in Kent and Devon, is one of the UK's leading centres for conservation breeding, and bred 50 water voles through its expert captive breeding programme for release on the upper Hogsmill river. Wildwood has played a key role in restoring water vole populations across the UK.

"The UK's biodiversity is facing a critical decline - putting our ecosystems, food security, and climate resilience at risk," said **Tyrone Capel**, Conservation Officer at Wildwood Trust. "Ambitious rewilding projects like this are central to our mission: returning nature to the places it once thrived. We're proud to support this initiative by breeding water voles for release along the Hogsmill and ultimately reversing the near 20 year extinction of Water voles in Surrey."

The creation of the **Chamber Mead wetlands** and river restoration work undertaken by SERT has improved conditions on the Hogsmill and transformed the area into an ideal habitat for water voles. This work forms part of SERT's broader vision to revive this rare urban chalk stream and inspire nature recovery in towns and cities.

Citizen Zoo, a rewilding organisation that has delivered a previous successful water vole release along the Hogsmill further downstream in Kingston, led on the reintroduction. The team is now calling for local volunteers to support ongoing monitoring of the population.

"This is not just a win for water voles—it's a flagship moment for urban river restoration across the UK," said **Elliot Newton**, -Director of Rewilding at Citizen Zoo. "With the help of local people, we're giving this species a real chance to thrive again."

"We are deeply committed to protecting and nurturing habitats that help biodiversity flourish, and we are honoured that the Upper Hogsmill River in our borough has been chosen as the second release site for the reintroduction of water voles-" said **Councillor Liz Frost**, Chair of Epsom & Ewell Borough Council's Environment Committee. "They will be the first water voles living in the wild in Surrey for over 20 years. This milestone reflects the strength of our partnerships to create the right conditions for these once-extinct animals to thrive and reflects our borough's dedication to managing biodiversity and creating resilient ecosystems that play a role in tackling climate change."

Water voles—made famous as Ratty in *The Wind in the Willows*—are one of the UK's fastest-declining mammals, having disappeared from 94% of their former range. Their return to Surrey is both a symbolic and ecological milestone.

Wild Wood Trust