

## **Parish Magazine Article November 2021**

### **Mink: fashion victims** by Michael Blencowe of the Sussex Wildlife Trust

'The Wind in the Willows' is one of Britain's most beloved books. Yet this story of riverbank wildlife would have lost some of its charm if, in the final chapter, Kenneth Grahame had introduced a new character; a deranged American serial killer who eats his victims. It's easy to cast American mink as the bad guys. With long, sleek bodies equipped with razor sharp teeth they're natural born killers, as vicious in water as they are on land. Part polecat, part piranha. But it was the mink's adaptation to winter and water - thick, waterproof fur - that was its downfall. Enter the real villains of this tale; the ghastly humans who craved mink fur coats and the greedy ones keen to profit from a mink massacre.

American mink were first imported to the UK in 1929. By the fifties, British mink farms were springing up everywhere, including Sussex, producing pelts at full pelt. But fur farmers had overlooked one important thing; mink were smarter than they were. Mary Potter remembers the Buxted farm; "they built the cages with ordinary wire netting. The mink made short work of that and escaped. With stronger netting, they started again with more mink, but again, the wire was no match for their teeth. After a third attempt with stronger wire netting they gave up and just released them."

The result of a new alien predator invading our waterways was catastrophic. Kingfishers, ducks, moorhens, fish and toads suddenly found themselves on the mink's menu and were swiftly dispatched with a Dracula-style neck bite. The worst victim was the water vole – Ratty from 'The Wind in the Willows' - which mink almost completely eradicated from Sussex.

The late (and legendary) Jim 'The Fish' Smith walked and worked the River Ouse for decades. He first encountered a mink when one cruised past him downstream on a piece of driftwood. "I had never seen a mink before and at first had no idea what it was," said Jim "but it wasn't long before we saw God knows how many along the river." During the sixties, Jim and four others were employed to trap and humanely kill mink along the Ouse. "In those days we were doing nothing else but trapping mink. We were catching 25-30 a week."

Thankfully, fashions and attitudes change. Mink farms are gone but their ferocious, furry legacy remains in our rivers. "These days you don't see that many mink, so I have to conclude that the effort we have put in to controlling them has been successful," said Jim "but you're never going to get rid of all of them."

Ends

***Sussex Wildlife Trust is an independent charity caring for wildlife and habitats throughout Sussex. Founded in 1961, we have worked with local people for over half a century to make Sussex richer in wildlife.***

***We rely on the support of our members to help protect our rich natural heritage. Please consider supporting our work. It's easy to join online at [sussexwildlifetrust.org.uk/join](https://sussexwildlifetrust.org.uk/join)***