



## Bright eyes and clear water

**W**e hear so much nowadays about climate change, habitat loss and threats to nature on an industrial scale that we are in danger of becoming immured to it all; we just sigh in exasperation and turn the page.

It's not all disaster and some things have improved quite remarkably. Those who can remember the days of the Eastern Bloc may well recall those hideously polluted rivers which used to flow into the west; often they were torrents of yellow foam, frothing at weirs and pouring great pools of pollution into distant seas. Take a look today and most of those sources are gone. Many rivers of northern Europe are home now to innumerable species whose very presence shows cleaner water and a healthier environment.

A simple indicator of better conditions is to watch for the larger predators and count them per so many hundred metres of riverbank. Assume they consume half their weight in food per week and easy multiplication gives an approximate idea



You can spot signs that water voles are near

of how many fish, frogs and rodents the waterway supports.

We can do the same for ourselves on the much smaller scale of Horsham's own water courses. We have the Arun, the Red River, the Horn Brook and many other streams and ditches running like watery veins through our area. Most of them are routes we regularly stroll,

perhaps with the dog on the leash, and keeping a watchful eye open may well reveal something about the state of our countryside.

Try looking out for water voles.

If there are herons on your patch or owls there may well be voles. They are small little bundles of busy-bodies which lend interest to any river bank. From the start we must be clear that voles are not rats and once you've spotted a few you won't mix them up. Voles have stubby noses and rounded-off faces without the protuberant ears of rats, and they lack that off-putting humpy gait of rats.

Voles love water, good, clean, fresh water, and the first you'll note of their presence is the loud plop as they dive in. They swim with all four paws and make a V wake in the water, whereas rats thrash their tails and usually take to water only when forced to. Look along the riverbanks for signs of their burrows and for the remains of their meals. They eat almost anything, and the stems of water plants are chewed off at 45 degrees, a clear indication of this beguiling rodent.

They breed at a phenomenal pace, with one mature female bearing perhaps

six litters in a year of six young each, and the daughters breeding too once they're a month old. A single pair can be responsible for a 60-fold increase in numbers in a season, allowing for casual visits by wandering males, except that in practice voles are a primary food source for so many larger creatures from herons to foxes to pike that their numbers never explode.

Despite their breeding prowess, voles numbers in the UK are on the decline, but given their response to a favourable environment populations can bounce back. Keep an eye out on Horsham walks and we just might witness the recovery we so badly want of this indicator of a wider improvement in all of nature around us.

*The Horsham Society is concerned about the past, present and future of the town. It seeks to promote good planning and design for the built environment and open spaces. Membership of the Horsham Society is open to anyone who shares these concerns. For more information, visit the website [www.horshamsociety.org](http://www.horshamsociety.org) or phone 01403 259038.*