



Hebridean Mink Project

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Safeguarding our Wildlife

The Hebridean Mink Project, now in its final months, aims to eradicate the alien predator, American mink, from the Uists and to dramatically reduce their numbers in South Harris to prevent recolonisation. The project is being carried out in the interests of nature conservation, namely to protect threatened bird populations of international significance.

NEWS

◆ Progress report

The last few months have been spent searching areas where sightings have been reported, mainly in North Uist and Benbecula. Trapping in South Harris has mainly been in the South East corner. Eleven mink have been caught in South Harris. Although there have been no captures in the Uists, there have been four sightings and two records of possible tracks. These have been followed up by trappings and searching with dogs in the area. It is being recommended that a substantial level of trapping continues after the Hebridean Mink Project funded trapping ends on March 31st. This will prevent populations reforming and spreading from any remaining animals. A high level of trapping is also required in Harris to remove remnant mink populations that remain untrapped in this phase of the project. People are asked to report any mink sightings to the project, on 01859 511135.

◆ Staffing

There are currently six members of staff in the Uists and three on Harris. In the time remaining, effort will be put into covering as much ground as possible by canoe in the Uists. Any periods of good weather will be used for boat work in and around the Sound of Harris.

◆ PhD

The detailed population and behavioural research being carried out by Alice Helyar as part of the Hebridean Mink Project has been submitted for her PhD. Alice has been conducting her project in the North of the control area between Tarbert and Luskentyre and on the Isle of Taransay. This has uncovered some interesting information which will need to be incorporated into future trapping strategies.

◆ Community Liaison Meeting

A community liaison meeting was held in Drinishader in November which was well attended. Representatives of interest groups discussed topics such as sightings and Martin Scott, RSPB, gave a talk on the continued monitoring of terns. A more solid foundation for future integration of fisheries work was discussed with the Western Isles Fisheries Trust.

◆ Tern Monitoring

The RSPB have been carrying out monitoring on tern sites across the Western Isles. Significant differences have been recorded in tern hatching success between Lewis and the Uists – and much of these differences can be attributed to mink predation. Tern hatching success in the Uists was not being affected by mink predation and this is an indication that the project is succeeding, in its aim to protect breeding birds in Special Protected Areas (SPAs) in the Uists from mink predation.

◆ Future work

Priorities for these, the final few months of the project, include following up all reported sightings of mink. A European workshop is to take place in Stornoway in May to help share experience about controlling alien species and to inform the proposed 'Phase 2' of the Hebridean Mink Project; the eradication of mink from the remainder of the Western Isles. It is hoped that speakers and participants from throughout the European Union will attend the event.

◆ Phase 2

As densities of mink are reduced in South Harris and the Uists as a result of the first phase of the project, mink still exist in high numbers on the Isle of Lewis – an area not included in the first phase. A recolonisation of Harris and the Uists is inevitable if this source population of mink persist on Lewis. Extending the eradication programme to Lewis would be necessary in order to prevent this occurring, thus eradicating the mink from the Western Isles as a whole. An application to the EC LIFE Nature Fund has been submitted, and a response is awaited. If the application is successful, a second phase could start in July 2006. A second phase would be managed by a partnership of Scottish Natural Heritage and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, with support from Comhairle nan Eilean Siar and Western Isles Enterprise.

BACKGROUND

Mink are not native to the Western Isles or even to the UK. They pose particular threats to wild birds as they will eat eggs, chicks and adult birds from nationally important sites. The Uists include some of Europe's most important bird sites and these are afforded protection under the EC Wild Birds Directive in designated Special Protected Areas (SPA's). The UK is required by the Directive to protect the interests of SPA's. As well as posing a threat to wildlife, mink also have a damaging effect, directly or indirectly, on crofting, fish farming, tourism and fisheries. The mink situation is very much a shared problem and the only permanent solution is eradication through a programme of humane lethal control.

The Hebridean Mink Project is bringing more than £1.65m of European, public and other funding to the Western Isles. Partners include Scottish Natural Heritage, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, The Scottish Executive, Central Science Laboratory, Western Isles Enterprise and Comhairle nan Eilean Siar (the local authority), and the Project is part funded by the EU LIFE Nature Fund.

For further information about the Hebridean Mink Project, please contact the project manager, Sugoto Roy, on 01859 511135 (s.roy@csl.gov.uk) or Scottish Natural Heritage in Stornoway on 01851 705258. Information is also posted on the Western Isles section of the SNH website at www.snh.org.uk.

Please note – Sugoto Roy's new address is Drinishader School House, Harris HS3 3DX.

Media enquiries should be directed to Mairi Gillies, SNH, on 01463 723134 (mairi.gillies@snh.gov.uk)