Water vole (Arvicola amphibious) as an object of long-term biomonitoring in a floodplain area (Western Siberia, Russia)

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Introduction

The study of animal population dynamics is an element of the regional environmental monitoring system. The most interesting research is related to repetitive cycles of small mammals (Litvinov et al., 2013; Lukyanova, 2017; Bazhenov et al., 2019; Yakimova, 2021). An example of such cycles is the number of population surges of the water vole Arvicola amphibious (Linnaeus, 1758) in the valleys of the middle course of the Tom River. Many scientific works are devoted to the changes in small mammal communities under the influence of various anthropogenic factors (Nor-dal, 1995; Chemousova et al., 2014; Gallo et al., 2017; Luchninakova et al., 2020). Therefore, Balciuškas & Balciuškienė (2021) considered successive processes in communities of small mammals in flooded meadows that have transformed into hayfields. There are also studies on the transformation of the coastal-swamp complex of small mammals and works assessing the impact of deforestation on populations of small mammals (Bogdźiewicz & Zwołak, 2014; Ołtew, et al., 2016, 2018; Ilyashenho et al., 2019; Sullivan et al., 2019). Only a few of the studies consider not only the negative effects of human activity but also the statuses of populations of small mammals (Raybuck et al., 2012; Attuquaye et al., 2017; Ilyashenko et al., 2020). However, most studies are short-term; they do not examine population recovery processes. It is equally rare to find work that compares the state of small mammal communities before and after major interventions begin (Smith et al., 2020, Kovalevsky, 2021).

From this point of view, the situation in the Tom River valley during the construction of the Krapivinsky water reservoir is of particular interest. Since 1976, continuous logging of floodplain forests has been carried out in the bed of the future water reservoir. In total, 42 thousand hectares of forests, mainly from the dark coniferous forests (i.e. dark coniferous fir or spruce forests) were cut down in the process of clearing the bed. For environmental and economic reasons, the flooding of the territory did not take place, the construction of the water storage reservoir was stopped, and the natural communities of the anthropogenically disturbed territory entered the stage of restoration succession. Moreover, the elimination of 20 rural settlements in the flood zone, and at the same time the almost complete cessation of agricultural activities (cultivation of fields and gardens, grazing, haymaking), led to a sharp decrease in the anthropogenic impact on meadow ecosystems. Currently, the territory is under a limited nature use regime, which has led to natural reforestation, overgrowth of arable land, hayfields and pastures (Ilyashenko et al., 2020).

The paper is devoted to the dynamics of the water vole population in the conditions of total deforestation of valley forests and their subsequent restoration. We analyzed the relative population of small mammals in the typical biotopes in the Tom River basin (Western Siberia) on the border of the forest-steppe and taiga zones. From 1978 to 2019, 1,139 water voles Arvicola amphibious (Linnaeus, 1758) (synonym of A. terrestris) were caught with 50-meter trapping grooves; for 788 individuals we assessed the condition of non-metric features (phanes) of the skull. It was found that changes in the population level are non-cyclical, while against the background of a generally low occurrence of the species in the region, the population level increased tenfold in some years. It was shown that such episodic population surges can significantly impact the structure of the community of small mammals. In the valley of the Tom River, the water vole prefers inhabit wet meadows and ecotone areas between the meadow and the dark coniferous taiga forest. During the years of population surges, the water vole intensively occupies new nesting sites due to the dispersal activity of young animals but at the same time retains the original biotopic preferences. Dispersal of the species takes place in waterlogged wetlands. Most of the animals caught during the peak of their numbers were young animals of late broods born from overwintered individuals. The conducted phenetic analysis revealed the heterogeneity of young animals during the population surge, which allowed us to assume the participation of several populations in the formation of the peak. In the final surge year, the surge was characterized by an extremely low percentage of participation in the breeding of young females and the appearance of a large number of weakened animals, which led to crisis in the species population and the disappearance of the water vole from the captures. The research shows that one cannot predict the success of this process at the current stage; therefore, after flooding, it is necessary to continue monitoring.

Keywords: dynamics; population; population outbreaks; cranial phanes; resettlement.

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borne diseases and parasites that are dangerous for human health. Therefore, in years of mass reproduction, the share of this species in the rodent community can reach 90%, which leads to a decrease in the number of all other species, a reduction in the one nest, as a result, the alteration of the community’s structure (Chechulin et al., 2005; Litvinov et al., 2013; Meulemans, 2020).

When processing the material, we classified each specimen according to the scheme for the water vole proposed by Peskov & Emelyanov (2000, 2001). The paper aims to study population surges of the water vole based on extrapolate the data obtained to species that occupy similar ecological niches. The paper aims to study population surges of the water vole based on the example of populations in the valley of the Tom River.

**Materials and methods**

The work with animals was conducted under the Protocol on the Ethics Commission of Kemerovo State University (February 15, 2018 No. 1). All the procedures were carried out in accordance with the International Guiding Principles for Biomedical Research Involving Animals from the Council for International Organizations of Medical Sciences.

We summarized the material on the water vole collected in the valley of the Tom River for the period 1978–2019. Relative population estimates were carried out using a system of trapping grooves in the main biotopes of the area, including meadow areas in the dark coniferous taiga (or dark coniferous taiga) forests, mixed forests, overgrown wastelands on the site of agricultural land, and overgrown cuttings on the site of various types of forests. The small mammals were captured using 50-meter trapping grooves and then analyzed.

The total number of captured individuals was 1,139. Biotopic timing was estimated using the index of fidelity to biotopes proposed by Pesenko (1982), which is conventionally used in studies of small mammals (Ivanter et al., 2017; Ilyashenko et al., 2019, 2020; Ivanter, 2020). The index is calculated using the following formula:

\[
F_i = \frac{(n_i \times N - n_i \times N_j)}{(n_i \times N + n_j \times N - 2n_i \times N_j)},
\]

where \(n_i\) – the number of individuals of the 1st species in the jth sample (biotope) with the \(N_j\) volume, \(n_i\) – the number of individuals of this species in all collections with the total \(N\) volume.

The value of the \(F_i\) indicator changes from “–1” when the species is absent in a given habitat to “+1” when the species occurs only there. A zero indicator indicates the indifference of the species to the given biotope (i.e., the species does not prefer it but does not avoid it either). If the timing indicators in all the studied biotopes were equal to zero or slightly (±0.25) deviate from it in one direction or another, then the species was classified as habitat generalists.

The state of non-metric features (phenes) of the skull were measured according to the presence or absence of a specific non-metric feature: A. amphibius

**Results**

In the Kemerovo Region, the water vole is found in the foothills of the Salar Ridge and the Kuznetsky Alatau, along the valley of the River Inya and the River Tom and their tributaries; it occurs the Kuznetsk Depression. Landscape populations living in the Kemerovo Region belong to the foothill-stream type (Panteleyev, 2001a). The animals inhabit grasslands and the marshy part of the valleys of rivers and streams, oxbow lakes and lakes. In the first half of the 20th century, the species was actively harvested for its skins. In the Kemerovo Region, the main area of water vole harvesting was in the middle course of the Tom River and above and along the Kondora River. In the mid-1930s, more than 160 thousand skins of water vole were harvested in Gornaya Shoria (Tashtagolsky, Myskovsky, and Kuzedeyevsky districts). During mass reproduction of rodents, more than 160 thousand skins of water vole were harvested. There were no cases of mass reproduction of water vole throughout the north of the region.

In the Krapivinsky district, the species is not numerous; its share among rodent captures accounts for no more than 5%. Near the Lachino-vo Biological Station of the Kemerovo State University (54°49’ N,
87°00' E), the species inhabits floodplain meadows, overgrown cuttings along the bank of the Tom River, and ecotones in the upper part of the valley slope of its tributary, the Stepovaya River.

Wet meadows and ecotones between the meadow and the dark coniferous taiga forest are the preferred biotopes for the water vole in the Azhendarovo permanent study area (Fig. 3).

Even though the habitat conditions are close to optimal for the water vole in the Tom River valley, the species is generally characterized by a low population. A series of floodplain lakes and extensive areas of swampy meadows and clearings at the foot of the Azhendarovo ridge contribute to the formation of isolated populations of water vole living on the periphery of the studied area. Perhaps, due to such negative factors directly at the hospital, only two periods of increased numbers can be distinguished during the 40 years of research on small mammals. The first one was observed in 1980 when the number of the specimens increased 5 times during the summer, but the next year it returned to the initial level (Fig. 4).

During this period, the water vole concentrated mainly on floodplain meadows (Fig. 5), penetrating the dark coniferous taiga forests and, to a minor extent, the cuttings.

During the second period, the water vole concentrated mainly on floodplain meadows and clearings at the foot of the Azhendarovo ridge (Fig. 6), penetrating the dark coniferous taiga forests and, to a minor extent, the cuttings.

However, at the beginning of August, there was a sharp drop in the number of the studied species (Fig. 6). Cases of caught animals suffering diseases became more frequent; when kept in captivity, the animals usually died within a day. The young showed no signs of puberty, which led to the collapse of the population. In 2016, only 12 specimens were caught, and in the next three years, not a single capture was recorded (Fig. 5): the water vole has completely disappeared from the catch.

The analysis of the phenetic heterogeneity of animals according to the data for 2011–2016 shows that although animals of the usual phenotype made up a significant proportion throughout the years of the study, the nature of deviations from it in animals captured in 2014 and 2015 was multidirectional.

The analysis of the contribution of individual phenes to the separation of samples in the space of canonical discriminant functions showed that the most significant were the phenes associated with the features of the mandible. Moreover, the frequency of the appearance of foramen was maximum in 2014 and minimum in 2015. In the predorbital foramen and the oval foramen area, on the contrary, the frequency of the appearance in 2015 was significantly higher than in 2014 (Table 1).

Based on paired features, the asymmetry coefficients were calculated for each species and each year of capture (Table 2).

Significant differences according to the Student criteria were found when comparing the material for 2014 and 2015. They resulted in the most pronounced differences in the level of asymmetry between the samples of animals captured in 2014 and 2015. Based on these data, we can conclude that in 2015, in addition to the original phenotypes of 2014, other, more asymmetric ones appeared.
**Discussion**

In general, the biotopic preferences of the water vole in the study area are quite typical for Siberia. According to the material collected in other regions, primarily in the forest-steppe zone of the Novosibirsk Region, where long-term research was conducted, there occurred similar trends. Even small islands of deciduous forests are avoided by the water vole. The high number of the studied species in the Tom valley on the ecotone on the border with the dark coniferous taiga forest is all one of the most remarkable in our research. This trend is probably due to the fact that low-lying areas of aspen-fir forests have undergone significant waterlogging, which attracts the species under study. It avoids drier areas of the dark coniferous taiga (Panteleyev, 2001b, 2010).

The dynamics of the population of water voles in the study area has an outbreak character, noted by the researchers almost throughout the species range; however, it differs significantly from such in neighboring regions. Thus, for the forest-steppe zone of the north of the Novosibirsk Region, researchers marked a 24-year cycle of population fluctuations, for the wetlands of the Barabinskaya forest-steppe, a 10-year cycle is typical; in Yakutia, there is a short, 5-year cycle, and in the mountainous regions of Altai, there is a long cycle of 50 years. The external limiting factors for the existence of water vole populations are the hydrological conditions of habitats. Taking into account these trends, we expected to see similar results in the middle reaches of the Tom River (the study region) and downstream, in the taiga floodplains within the Tomsk Region. Nevertheless, we found that a clear 12-year cycle is manifested in the Tomsk Region, whereas in our studies, surges in water vole numbers were observed between the intervals of 35 years. Some studies show that in conditions of anthropogenic transformation, in particular, under the influence of agriculture, the natural rhythm of population dynamics and the nature of its peaks are disrupted (Nazarova & Evsikov, 2012; Litvinov et al., 2013; Erdakov & Litvinov, 2014; Evsikov et al., 2016; Meulemans, 2020).

It is worth noting the peculiar nature of the resettlement dispersion during the two mass surges of the population. In 1980, there was a significant increase in the numbers of voles in meadow biotopes, as happens in the Barabinskaya lowland (Erdakov & Litvinov, 2014). In 2015, there was a clear pattern of redistribution, when the water vole was actively penetrating into the dark coniferous taiga forests. Other scientists also noted a similar pattern of partial penetration along the river valleys and the shores of the forest zone (Panteleyev, 2001b). The presence of wetlands is often a decisive factor for the resettlement of this species, especially in mountainous areas. This fact was emphasized by Panteleyev (2001b), who analyzed the range of the species in the Caucasus. From these standpoints, the deep penetration of a water vole through the swampy foothills of the Azhendarovo Ridge into the taiga does not seem to be something incredible.

We found that in 2013, most of the young animals were caught in a fairly narrow strip along the border of the clearing on the site of the dark coniferous taiga forest and swampy meadow. However, based on the distribution of breeding individuals, one can see that the points of their capture are shifted to the border between the clearing and the dark coniferous taiga forest. In 2014, adult animals were already noticed in a wider range of habitats, primarily inhabiting wet meadows. In 2015, favourable conditions for the nesting of this species were preserved, and the water vole began to use the floodplain lakes of the Azhendarovo Basin more actively. The species occupied a more extensive set of habitats, reaching its maximum. The successful reproduction of the settled animals allowed the water voles to expand their range to all types of meadows and drier areas of the dark coniferous taiga. The settlement involved young animals who did not reach puberty.

**Fig. 7.** Seasonal dynamics of the number of *Arvicola amphibius* at the Azhendarovo biological station in 2014–2015

**Fig. 8.** Age and sex structure of *Arvicola amphibius* in the Tom River valley according to the records at the Azhendarovo Biological Station for 1978–2019
The water vole is believed to be one of the most actively reproducing rodents. In optimal conditions, the water vole could colonize new territories. This process includes the dispersal of young animals into the study area. This trend was also evidenced by the analysis of the asymmetry of the skull and its non-metric coefficients, including the waterlogging of land and the state of local communities. Nonetheless, the success of this process will depend on many factors, including the waterlogging of land and the state of local communities.

The prolongued 2014–2015 population surge is of interest. Presumably, the prolongation of the population peak and its unusual intensity can be explained by successive outbreaks in neighboring populations. Phenetic analysis shows that the high number of water voles in 2015 was due not so much to the reproduction of animals with the original phenotype or animals born in 2014 as to the immigration of individuals with other features of the skull structure from nearby territories. The nesting of the water vole took place in two stages and began in 2013–2014 with the animals inhabiting floodplain areas with numerous lakes. As a result of such breeding, they could encounter the water vole population inhabiting the swampy foothills of the ridge. In this case, the appearance of a large number of species with a different phenotype in 2015 should be considered as a response of one population to the invasion attempt by another.

Currently, there are plans to resume the construction of the Krapiinsky Reservoir and flood the research area. In the case of gradual flooding, the water vole can move to the non-flooded areas of the Tom River valley. Nonetheless, the success of this process will depend on many factors, including the waterlogging of land and the state of local communities of small mammals.

**Conclusion**

In the study area, the water vole mainly settles in swampy meadows and ecotone areas with high humidity and sufficient food supply. Animals avoid cluttered forest areas of cuttings, the dark coniferous taiga forests, as well as the mixed forests. The population dynamics of the species are characterized by periodic surges with annual peaks and a subsequent decrease in the number to the average annual value. There were 2 mass surges in the study area over 40 years. During the surge, there was increase in the number of young, immature individuals, which indicated the dispersal of young animals into the study area. This trend was also evidenced by the analysis of the asymmetry of the skull and its non-metric features. The introduction of animals into unusual habitats may cause the development of epizootic phenomena that lead to a sharp decline in the population of the species. If the construction of the reservoir is resumed, it will be necessary to continue monitoring of the settlement of water voles from the flooded floodplain.
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