

Crayfish in Essex Rivers

WE NEED YOUR HELP

White-clawed Crayfish – our native crayfish

“Should the current trend in the decline of white-clawed crayfish continue, the species faces extinction in Britain within 30 years”

White-clawed crayfish are Britain's only native crayfish. They have suffered a dramatic decline since the 1980s and have disappeared from many parts of the country, which has made them an endangered species protected by the Wildlife and Country Act 1981. Much like the fate of the red squirrel following the introduction of their grey American relatives, white-clawed crayfish have suffered at the hands (or claws!) of the bigger, aggressive American crayfish. These cannibalistic American crayfish escaped from farming ponds in the 1970s and are threatening the future of their English cousin, the white-clawed crayfish.

Ecology

White-clawed crayfish (WCC) are the largest native freshwater crustacean in Britain's rivers. They play an important role in the aquatic food web, providing a food source for a variety of animals like fish, birds and mammals such as otters. WCC prefer clean and relatively hard alkaline waters and shelter in crevices under submerged stones, tree roots and plants. They are most active during the summer months and are nocturnal. WCC are very sensitive to pollution and changes in habitat.



Crayfish in Essex – can you help?

To help save our native white-clawed crayfish and monitor invading crayfish species we need to know where they are located. Very few records exist for crayfish in Essex: your sighting will help build up a picture of native and non-native crayfish species in our county and will contribute towards the Essex Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP).

If you have come across a crayfish in your local river then please contact us with the details. All we need is:

- The date and location of crayfish sighting
- Any information to help identify the species (see opposite page)

White-clawed crayfish are strictly protected under both UK and European law. This makes it illegal to disturb the species or its habitat and you will need a licence to survey or handle them.

Signals are very aggressive. They should be apparent by viewing through the water, as they will be snapping and flashing their red claws.

Biological diversity – or ‘biodiversity’ – is the variety of life on earth and includes all plants and animals, together with the soils, rocks and water on which they depend.

Alien Crayfish – a serious threat

Of the invading American crayfish, the signal crayfish has become the most well-established, especially in the south of England. Signal crayfish have colonised parts of Essex including stretches of the Stour and Blackwater. They affect the native white-claws in two ways: as well as out-competing and eating the native crayfish, the aggressive signal crayfish can also carry crayfish plague, a fungal disease. Crayfish plague is lethal to the native crayfish and has wiped out populations across the country.

Without a license, it is illegal under the Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981 to release or allow to escape into the wild, signal and other non-native crayfish into any open waters because of their great mobility and the consequent impossibility of containment.

Signal crayfish have an enormous appetite and can have other negative impacts on river life and fish communities. They also affect the stability of river bank by their extensive burrowing. Of the four other alien crayfish, only the narrow-clawed (Turkish) crayfish has been spotted in Essex. These are less widespread and aggressive and have a high tolerance for salty water.

Crayfish plague is a fungus which can be carried to different river catchments by damp fishing equipment or bait. In order to protect the remaining pockets of native crayfish, all wet equipment should be dry for more than 24 hours and disinfected before moving to another river system.

Crayfish identification

White-Clawed Crayfish

Adults can reach 12cm from the tip of the rostrum (nose) to the end of their telson (tail)

Sides of rostrum (projection between eyes) converge towards tip

Adults have pinky-white claws (under-sides)
Juvenile crayfish are harder to identify

Signal Crayfish

Can grow much larger than White-clawed Crayfish, up to 30cm

Sides of rostrum parallel with distinct 'shoulders' before tip

Adults have distinctive red claws (under-sides) with clearly visible white marks on the top of their claws



Essex Biodiversity Project, a group of more than 40 nature conservation organisations, statutory agencies, voluntary interest groups, businesses, community groups and local authorities working together for the biodiversity of Essex.

Funding members:



Supporting members: Braintree District Council • British Trust for Conservation Volunteers • Butterfly Conservation • Castle Point Borough Council • Colchester Borough Council • Conservators of Epping Forest • Dedham Vale & Stour Valley Project • Essex Amphibian and Reptile Group • Essex Bat Group • Essex Birdwatching Society • Essex Estuaries Initiative • Essex Field Club • Essex Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group • Game Conservancy Trust • Havering Borough Council • Lee Valley Regional Park • Peoples Trust for Endangered Species • Royal Horticultural Society • Royal Society for the Protection of Birds • Southend Borough Council • Thames Chase Community Forest • Thames Estuary Partnership • The National Trust • The Suffolk Coasts & Heaths Unit • Writtle College.

Essex Biodiversity Project, c/o Joan Elliot Visitor Centre
 Abbots Hall Farm, Great Wigborough
 Colchester, Essex CO5 7RZ
www.essexbiodiversity.org.uk

Claire Cadman
 Biodiversity Coordinator
 01621 862981
clairec@essexwt.org.uk

Mark Iley
 Biodiversity Project Officer
 01621 862975
marki@essexwt.org.uk