

Stoat swimming across the River Severn.

Rosemary Winnall

On 11th August 2022 my grand-daughter and I went river dipping (with nets, not swimming costumes) beneath the quayside in Bewdley town about 200m below the bridge on the west bank of the Severn. It was the school holidays and the hot sunshine had encouraged many visitors to come to enjoy the delights of the town. But from the water's edge we were in our own quiet haven oblivious to the rush and bustle not far away. The river water was low and the riffles (the site of the old fording place at the bottom of Lax Lane) were very much in evidence. We had already spotted other 'river dippers', notably a Kingfisher, a few Goosanders, and a Little Egret. We had a small aquarium set up in the shade so that we could look in detail at what we'd caught before returning the creatures to the river. We dipped Minnows, Bullheads, a young Perch, Stone Loaches, Freshwater Shrimps, leeches (including the colourful *Glossiphonia complanata*), various caddis larvae most of which were cased, and the underwater River Saucer Bug *Aphelocheirus aestivalis*.

My son Simon, returning with mid-morning ice creams (an essential part of a Bewdley river day), shouted from the top of the quay "What's that swimming across the river?" By the time I got my binoculars up to my eyes it was halfway across the river swimming obliquely (as a canoeist would ferry-glide to prevent being swept downstream) towards the east bank. Although I expected to see a small black Mink, in the sunshine I got good binocular views of a chestnut head and a large creamy patch under the chin which extended high on the neck. I couldn't see the colour of its tail, but from its size I believe it was a Stoat. About six gulls were dive

bombing it and each time one got close the Stoat would turn its head and snap at it without changing course towards the opposite bank.

I rarely go anywhere without a camera, but on this occasion I only had my small waterproof Olympus TG6 with me to take close-up shots underwater. This hasn't got good telephoto options and so the resulting photos were very distant, but those with good eyesight might spot the stoat swimming in the middle of the river and the gulls ready to swoop (01). We watched the small body and its wake until it reached the far bank where it disappeared into riverside vegetation.

I wish I'd managed to get as good a photo as that taken by Mike Averill of a stoat swimming in Kemerton's lake in August 2019 (Averill 2019). It is well documented that Stoats swim well, and it is interesting to note that a wide river is no barrier to some animals' progress across-country. I'd previously seen a Grass Snake swimming across this river north of Bewdley and Chris Bradley tells me of Fallow Deer bucks swimming across during the autumn rut.

As we were packing up our dipping equipment our favourite Mute Swan, which wears the orange colour ring 38P, swam across to see us and we were able to feed her some of the floating swan pellets we'd obtained through the Worcester Swan Project. 38P was ringed as a cygnet on a small pool at Great Match Farm, Hagley on 7th September 2015 by David Atkinson, but she seems to have made Bewdley her home over the last year or so. She is friendly, probably because she spent some time in Wychbold Swan Rescue in 2020 before being released at Worcester. She doesn't have a mate this year, but we are hopeful that this winter she will avoid avian flu and find a friend.



01. Gulls "dive bombing" a Stoat swimming across the River Severn, 11th August 2022. Rosemary Winnall.

Reference

Averill, M. 2019. Swimming Stoat. *Worcestershire Record* 47:6.

Image

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