

Protected species fact sheet

Otters (*Lutra lutra*)

Background

This fact sheet has been prepared based on the following:

- work with otters and other species at the Welsh Mountain and Bristol zoos
- otter survey workshop with James Williams, Avon Wildlife Trust
- otter surveys with schools in Somerset
- conversations with specialists and researchers
- a general review of published material

Ecology

- male is dog, female is bitch, offspring are cubs
- related to stoats, weasels and badgers in a family called Mustelids
- can be found along rivers, lakes, estuaries and the coast
- otter house is a holt found under waterside trees, old rabbit burrows or cavities in a bank which can go as far as 10 m underground and have underwater entrances
- coastal living otters need freshwater to clean the salt from their fur
- are able to use bradycardia (used by aquatic mammals to slow the heartbeat and restrict blood flow to tissues, concentrating the heart, lungs and brain so conserving oxygen)
- can hold their breath for around six minutes
- smears oil from sebaceous glands for waterproofing of the outer coat making it susceptible to pollutants in the water
- main diet is fish and eels but also feed on crayfish, insects, larvae, mussels snails worms, ducks, small rabbits, ground nesting birds and their eggs
- sexually mature at around 18 months in males and 24 months in females
- gestation period approximately 63 to 65 days with litter size from 1 to 5
- life expectancy around 17 years
- males have larger 30 km ranges than females and overlap with other otters mainly females



Distribution

Otters suffered serious decline between the 1950s and 1970s but are now making a comeback across the UK.

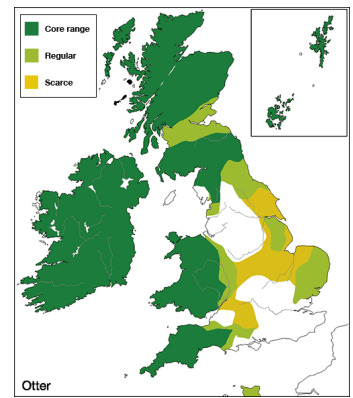
Current distribution as shown on the Mammal Society and Defra maps opposite shows a varied coverage over the UK but a low presence in central and south-east England.

Identification

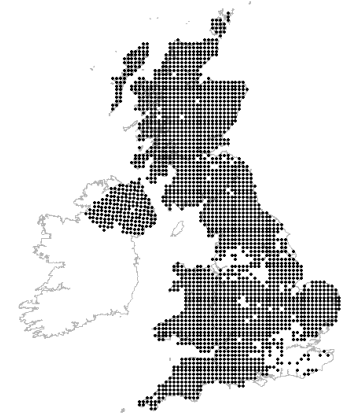
- Order - Carnivora
- Family - Mustelidae
- Sub-family - Lutrinae
- Genus and species - *Lutra lutra*
- brown fur on back, pale underside
- long slender bodies with thick tail used as rudder when swimming
- body length 1 m approx.
- short legs, webbed feet, five toes (very sensitive to touch)
- long sensitive whiskers (vibrissae), broad muzzle
- small ears, small eyes (good eyesight) bounding gait
- two layers of dense under fur, longer guard hair (flattens when wet trapping air bubbles as insulation)
- largely solitary except for family groups of mother and offspring
- mainly nocturnal

Population and protection

International: IUCN status: 2008 classification as Near Threatened.
 European: a European Protected Species under Appendix II of the Bern Convention, incorporated into UK national legislation as the Habitat Regulations 1994 Schedule 2 (and under the subsequent Habitat Regulations 2010) and the Directive on the Conservation of Natural Habitats and of Wild Fauna and Flora (Habitats & Species Directive) Annex IIa and IIIa
 National: Schedule 5 species listed under the Wildlife Countryside Act 1981



Mammal society distribution map



Defra distribution map



Typical otter locations



Conservation Status IUCN Red List Category Near Threatened, Decreasing	Individuals
England	present
Scotland	present
Wales	present
Northern Ireland	present
Total UK Population	10395-Unknown

(as amended)

A Species of Principal Importance under the NERC Act 2006.

Biodiversity Action Plan priority species in the national, regional, Devon BAP, and also in Local BAPs in Dartmoor, Exeter, Teignbridge and others.

Survey techniques

- consider health and safety, wear appropriate outdoor clothing, check the weather, inform someone where you are going, avoid a site that is flooded

- check rights-of-way and private land
- this is a protected species so do not disturb in any way

- take the right equipment e.g. binoculars (for spotting signs from a distance), Ordnance survey map of the area, clipboard, notebook, pens/pencils, fully charged mobile phone, camera, identification guide, food and drink

Otters are highly territorial and intelligent animals, and they want their messages to last and be found by other otters and so will leave them in prominent areas.

Here's what to look for :

Tracks - otter tracks have five toes, which arch around the front of a large pad. In soft ground claw marks and webs between toes may show. Do not confuse with badger, dog or mink (see diagram)

Spraints - a black tarry mucous often with fragments of bone or fish scales (see picture) can be as little as a few drops,. It has a stong smell. Often found under/next to/on top of bridges, prominent rocks, logs and boulders, intersections of paths and waterways.

Anal jelly - (see picture) is a jelly-like secretion, which also smells strongly.

Slides - where otters slide into the water can have footprints and evidence of tail

Rolling spots - otters will clean and dry themselves after swimming often in the same spots usually on grass and vegetation leaving it flattened

Food - or remains of partially eaten prey

Holts - often heavily sprainted and well hidden next to water, I once found a breeding bitch using water pipes,

Lie up - areas where otter will rest on land look for flattened grass and vegetation as cover

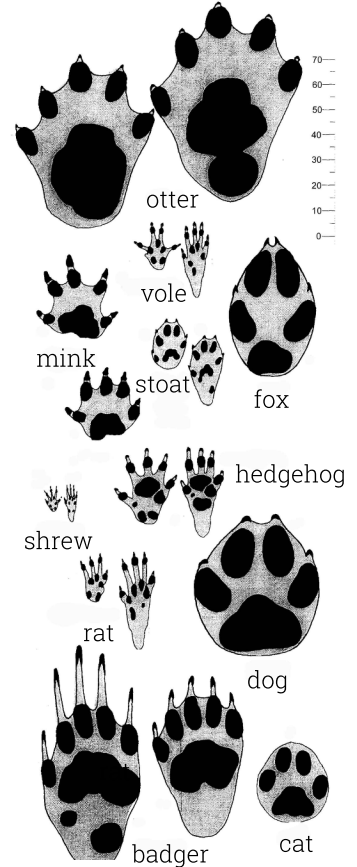
Threats

- road-deaths 309
- poor water quality and pollution
- fyke/eel nets
- wetland and other semi-natural habitat adjacent to watercourses has been lost to development, agricultural intensification
- drainage operations are reducing the availability of suitable resting and breeding habitat.

- *Pseudamphistomum truncatum* and *Metorchis bilis* parasites affect the gallbladders (ref Cardiff University Otter Project below)



Mink footprint Otter footprint



Comparative footprints to aid otter recognition



Otter anal jelly



Otter spraint



Mink



Otter



Otter

Comparative faeces

References/links /contacts

- Cardiff University research team. email: otters@cardiff.ac.uk
- www.iucnredlist.org/details/12419/0
- www.otterspecialistgroup.org/Bulletin/Volume24/Capber_2007.html
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