

# EUROPEAN OTTER *Lutra lutra*



## Why do otters need my help?

Otters declined catastrophically throughout much of Britain in the late 1950's, due to persistent organo-chlorine pesticides in widespread use at the time and other pollutants including PCBs. Hunting, which wasn't banned until 1978 and the effects of wetland loss may also have been significant factors.

Happily, otters have returned to our rivers and populations are recovering but there is no room for complacency: the otter has a slow reproductive rate and remains vulnerable to a number of factors, particularly road deaths, as well the loss of wetland habitats and poor river fish populations.

## How do I recognise an Otter?



### Otters have:

- a bounding gait (the tail is often held in a curved position)
- a medium to dark brown coat above, paler below
- a long streamlined body with a thick, tapered tail and short legs
- a body length of 1–1.2 metres from nose to tail tip
- sensitive whiskers on a broad, dog-like muzzle
- small ears and eyes (but they have good eyesight)

Otters are generally (but not strictly) nocturnal and sightings are not commonplace. They can be confused with the American mink which is smaller (about cat-sized), has a pointy face like a ferret and swims more buoyantly, with back and head well above the water surface.

## Where do otters live?

In Norfolk otters live in river valleys as well as on part of the coast. They use not only main river channels but also a variety of habitats within the river valley floor including small streams, ditches, lakes, ponds, reedbeds, fen and woodland. Otters are mainly solitary and may occupy large ranges of up to 40km.



## What do they eat?



Otters are opportunistic feeders. They feed mainly on fish (about 40-90% of their diet), taking a variety of species depending on what is available. In spring, amphibians are important food items. Otters occasionally take larger prey including mammals and water birds.

## How do I know if otters are present?

### Spraints

Otters deposit their droppings (known as a 'spraint') in prominent places such as on ledges under bridges. Spraints vary in shape, colour and consistency, but always have a distinctive musky or fishy sweet smell, reminiscent of Jasmine tea or newly-mown hay! Spraints have a scent 'signature' unique to each individual otter and have a social function, conveying information.



Otter spraint



Mink scat

Mink droppings are usually twisted in shape and when fresh smell very unpleasant – a good test if you are brave enough!

### Footprints

Otter footprints are asymmetrical and usually show only four toes (depends on the surface, etc.) even though they actually have five. Webbing between the toes rarely shows. Prints are up to 80mm across (range 42-80mm).

Mink prints are more symmetrical, have more widely spread toes and are much smaller (less than 45mm). These also show four or five toes.



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## Breeding

Breeding may occur at any time but the timing (or lack of it) is poorly understood at present. Males play no role in rearing the young (usually two in a litter) which are born in a secure breeding holt (these are sited in a variety of locations including tree root systems, bank holes & reedbeds). The cubs first venture outside at 2–3 months old and remain dependent on the female for up to about a year. Cub survival is critical in maintaining and expanding the otter population.



## Threats to Otters

Although populations are recovering, the otter remains threatened by a number of factors:

- road traffic accidents (probably the main factor)
- a lack of suitable habitat to provide undisturbed, secure areas for breeding
- disruption of watercourse and river valley connectivity due to developments, including road crossings
- poor fish and amphibian populations resulting in an inadequate food supply that cannot support them
- accidental deaths in eel (fyke) nets (nets must be fitted with a specially designed otter guard)



## For further details contact:

### Wildlife Information Service

Bewick House, 22 Thorpe Road, Norwich, NR1 1RY  
Email: [wild@norfolkwildlifetrust.org.uk](mailto:wild@norfolkwildlifetrust.org.uk)  
Tel: 01603 598333

## Legal status & protection

The European otter is the only native UK otter species. It's a European protected species (EPS) and is also fully protected under Schedule 5 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. You're breaking the law if you:

- capture, kill, disturb or injure otters (on purpose or by not taking enough care)
- damage or destroy a breeding or resting place (deliberately or by not taking enough care)
- obstruct access to their resting or sheltering places (deliberately or by not taking enough care)
- possess, sell, control or transport live or dead otters, or parts of otters

If you're found guilty of an offence you could get an unlimited fine and up to 6 months in prison.

## Conservation

Otters need an abundant, varied food supply and sympathetically managed habitats, offering undisturbed, secluded sites for breeding. Lowland rivers, riverbanks and the surrounding valley floor may lack appropriate features that promote adequate food supplies and provide breeding sites. These areas can be enhanced using a range of management measures for which agri-environment scheme grants may be available. Measures include planting appropriate bankside trees, creating patches of dense, undisturbed scrub and leaving ungrazed or uncultivated buffer zones along watercourses. In addition to rivers and streams, wet grassland, wet woodland, fen, reedbeds and their associated ditch networks are important habitats for otters.

## How can I help Otters?

Submit records to our local wildlife records centre, Norfolk Biodiversity Information Service (NBIS), stating What you saw, When (date) you saw it, Where you saw it (grid reference or postcode) and Who saw it. If you see a dead otter please report it to UK Wild Otter Trust as they may want to examine it.

## Surveys

Surveys should be done by a suitably experienced surveyor. You won't need a licence if you're using most methods of surveying unless there's going to be any disturbance of the otter or its resting place, e.g. using an endoscope camera to explore a hole that might be a holt.

