

The Otter (*Lutra lutra*)

'Our' otter is more properly known as the Eurasian otter, one of 13 species around the world. The Eurasian otter is the most widespread, with a range that stretches from the west coast of Ireland right across to Japan, from Norway in the north to north Africa and India in the south.

Weighing in at up to 15 kg and measuring over a metre in length, the otter is Britain's largest terrestrial carnivore. It is a long, slender animal with relatively short legs and a long tail, thick at the base and tapering evenly to the tip. The otter's coat is chocolate brown with a paler throat and chest.

Laura Berkeley



Otters in the UK: Decline

Once common throughout the UK, the otter began to suffer from persecution and increasing river pollution from industrialisation in the early 19th century. By the late 1970s it became clear that there had been a sudden and disastrous decline in the otter population throughout England and Wales since the late 1950s and that this fall was continuing. By 1980 the otter was almost extinct in most of England, parts of Wales and some areas of Scotland. The population crash in the second half of the 20th century was largely the result of pollution from agricultural pesticides, in particular a group of chemicals known as chlorinated hydrocarbons or organochlorines. These same chemicals also caused the sudden crash in populations of other predators, most notably peregrine and sparrowhawk.

Otters in the UK: Recovery

The use of organochlorine compounds was prohibited in 1975, and in 1978 the otter hunt was outlawed. With increased protection, the otter began to recover during the 1980s.

In England, the population has been reinforced through releases of captive bred animals in the south east, whilst everywhere enormous efforts have been made to restore waterside and wetland habitats to speed the otter's natural recovery. This has undoubtedly been helped by steady improvements in water quality, particularly following a ban on additional pesticides such as dieldrin.

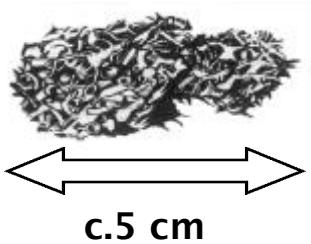
In Derbyshire, otters have been slow in making their way back to former haunts. The first signs of recovery didn't come until the mid 1990s, when animals from the growing populations to the south and west of the county began to move onto our rivers.

Although still an uncommon animal in the county, otters have now been recorded on most of our major river catchments and there are signs that a small but growing population is once again breeding on Derbyshire's waterways. Otters have even been seen in the River Derwent in the heart of Derby city centre.

**Otters have extremely dense underfur, with around 70,000 hairs per square centimetre!
The skin was once thought to have magic properties to protect against drowning.**

Searching for tracks and signs

Otters are extremely shy animals, so often the only evidence of their presence are their broad, five-toed footprints or their droppings or 'spraints'. These are used as territorial markings and so are left on prominent rocks or on tree roots along the water's edge. The best places to look are often ledges under bridges. Otter spraints are black or dark oily green when fresh, made up primarily of fish scales and bones held loosely together. About 5 cm long, spraints smell characteristically of freshly cut hay. With age, spraints turn pale grey and crumbly, but retain their sweet musky smell.



Otters and the Law

Otters and their holts are fully protected under UK and European legislation. It is an offence under the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981) to kill or disturb an otter or to damage, destroy or obstruct access to a structure or place which an otter uses for shelter, whether intentionally or not.

The female otter excavates a den known as a holt. This may be amongst tree roots, beneath boulders or in existing holes such as a rabbit warren or badger sett. The holt will be close to but not always immediately alongside the wetlands in which the adults feed. After a gestation period of approximately 65 days, a litter of 1-4 cubs is born. The cubs first leave the holt at about three months and stay with the mother for up to a year, by which time they should be independent enough to catch their own food. The male otter plays no role in rearing the young.

Females normally start to breed in their third year, and will then breed every two years. As the average life expectancy of an otter is only four years, the survival of the cubs is critical to maintain and expand the population.

The majority of an otter's diet is made up of fish, especially eels and other slow-swimming species. They will also eat amphibians, crayfish, waterfowl and small mammals.

Protecting otters in Derbyshire: what can you do?

- Look out for any signs of otters. Contact the Wildlife Trust if you know of any places where otters occur or used to occur, or if you see a dead otter.
- If you own or manage land it may be possible to leave some areas of dense scrub in quiet areas along the river bank for otters to lay up in, or restore or create wetland habitats within the river corridors. Ponds, ditches, wet woodland and reedbeds are all valuable for otters as well as a wealth of other wetland wildlife. Financial support may be available through local and national agri-environment schemes. Contact us for further information and advice.
- Join Derbyshire Wildlife Trust: your support will help us to manage our nature reserves to benefit otters.



Julian Jones

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