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# OTTER

## All About Otters



**Derbyshire**  
Wildlife Trust



# Otter Facts

**Scientific name:**

*Lutra lutra*

**Common name:**

Eurasian Otter

**Average lifespan:**

5–10 Years

**Appearance:**

The otter is a large mammal, with grey-brown fur, a broad snout, and a pale chest and throat.

**Diet:**

Fish, amphibians, crustaceans and mollusc's.

**Habitat:**

Freshwater, coastal, wetlands.

**Family:**

Mustelid

**Origin:**

Native

**Size:**

Length: 60–80cm

Tail: 32–56cm

Weight: 7–12 kg



# More About Otters

The physical appearance of the otter is easily recognised: chestnut brown fur, elongated body and a long, loping gait when running on land.

They are most at home in the water, forming a streamlined torpedo shape when swimming below the surface. Otters are exceptional swimmers able to travel approximately 400m in a single breath. Their spine is extremely flexible, and their webbed feet are perfect for propelling them swiftly through the water, sometimes reaching speeds of 12km/h.

Otters are a widespread species and can be found throughout the country. Although rarely spotted, they are becoming increasingly common in our rivers and lakes as otter numbers are growing, after centuries of decline due to persecution. Otters can travel far and will happily use over 20km of river habitat!

## Why are otters so important?

Otters are apex predators and top of the foodchain in our rivers. They need good water quality in order to support the wide range of food items required to survive – as generalists they will eat fish, amphibians, crustaceans and mollusc's. Especially the invasive American Signal Crayfish and the Zebra Mussel. If otter are present in an environment it is normally a promising sign that the waterway is in good condition.

**Did you know?** A group of otters is known as a 'romp' or 'lodge'. Otter groups are also referred to as a 'bevy' or a 'family'.



## History of Otters

25 years ago, otters in England were on the brink of extinction. The main reasons were:

- Leaching of agricultural chemicals into rivers, which caused the food chain to be polluted, effectively poisoning otters' food.
- Otters were persecuted, being regularly hunted as sport despite the 1978 hunting ban.
- Destruction of habitats

In the 1970s otters could only be found in a few locations in Scotland and Wales.

## What changed?

In the early 1990s these harmful chemicals were banned, giving rivers the chance to recover. As water quality increased, fish populations returned to rivers and lakes, bringing back a healthy ecosystem and otters to our waters. It is one of the best examples of what can happen when we simply stop polluting our rivers and allow nature to recover.

You're more likely to see an otter now than in the last sixty years!

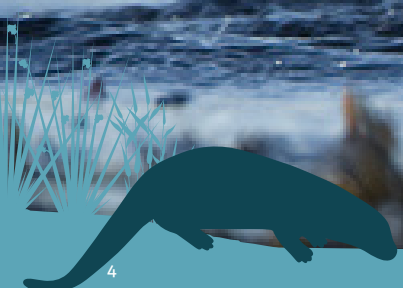
## Why some people don't want otters

However, not everyone is happy about otters returning. Commercial fishery owners are concerned for their prized specimen of fish, their livelihood, against these aquatic hunters, and have even called for otter culls.

**Actions:** Over the past few years the Angling Trust, the UK Wild Otter Trust, the Predation Action Group, and independent fishery owners have been working to find good solutions.

Natural England have begun to issue licences which allow the trapping and removal of otters from within a fenced fishery. The otters will be released outside the fishery without removing them from familiar territory, with minimal stress.

As long as anglers and conservationists can work together and remain proactive, the otter can be a welcome and an integral part of our aquatic environment.





# Habitat

Otters need good water quality to support their varied diet, so if otters are present it is a promising sign that the waterway is thriving.

Surprisingly, fallen trees are incredibly important to otters!

- Exposed roots provide secluded areas for otters to rest and breed
- Fallen trees provide hiding spots for fish

## How helping fish helps otters

A submerged tree can deflect the flow of water, removing silty deposits on the riverbed and exposing the naturally gravelly bed of the river – ideal spawning sites for many fish species. Providing habitat for fish means there is always an abundance of new prey, so otters don't go hungry and venture into other areas to hunt, where they could be more in more danger from humans.

But its benefits don't end there! The submerged branches are also the ideal places for fish to hide from predators.

Otters are also incredibly smart and will not exploit low prey numbers. Instead they will wait until prey numbers improve and take advantage of the extra fish. So, when there is a lower amount of fish, otters eat less, usually only the weak fish that are easy to catch. This means the healthy fish survive and breed, so there is fewer sick fish – this creates a healthy cycle of predator and prey.



## Otter Signs

**Tracks:** If otters are present then you will find their tracks alongside rivers and streams. Although otters have 5 toes, sometimes only 4 toes appear in the print. They have large, round prints (5–7cm in width, 6–9cm in length) which are often pushed deep into the clay, providing clear ID field signs.

## Droppings

Otters leave spraints (droppings) close to water and in prominent places, such as fallen trees and bridges, as 'scented messages' to find mates and defend territory. They contain mainly fish bones, shells, feathers or fur. They have no common size but are usually a greenish, black-grey colour, and surprisingly is sweet-smelling – described to smell of jasmine tea or laurel flowers. It looks similar to mink droppings, though mink droppings lack the pleasant scent.





## Breeding & Pups

- Baby otters are called pups, or sometimes kittens.
- The Eurasian otter is a solitary creature, preferring its own company, unless breeding with young.
- Otter pups usually come in litters of two or three, and can be born at any time of the year.
- Pups are normally born in dens, called holts, which can be in a tree root system, a hole in a bank or under a pile of rocks. The pup doesn't leave the holt until it is around 10 weeks old.



- Females with pups reduce sprainting to avoid detection from potential threats.
- A pup's fur is too dense for it to swim underwater, so their mother leaves it floating on the top of the river until the adult fur grows.
- Female otters rear their kits alone, and the young can stay with their mother for up to 18 months, though most juveniles will disperse at 13–15 months old. This is because they need to learn how to swim, and how to hunt successfully before they can find their own territory.





# The Weird and Wonderful

## Did you know?

- Otters have 70,000 hairs per cm<sup>2</sup> which helps keep them warm, as unlike other water loving mammals, such as seals, they do not have blubber. For comparison, Huskies have approximately 600 hairs per cm<sup>2</sup>! Obviously with all that fur, otters spend a lot of their time grooming!
- Female otters are called sows and male otters are called boars.
- They are incredibly smart: they'll use rocks to smash open hard shells like clams, and store food in the loose skin under their armpits.
- River otters perform 'scat dances' by stomping their hind legs and lifting their tail, before leaving spraints (droppings).
- Zoroastrians (an ancient religion) used to think otters were sacred, and would hold lavish ceremonies for otters found dead in the wild.
- Otters manage fish stock sustainably. If the fish population become depleted, the otter will move on to allow the fish to repopulate. Unlike the American Mink (Easily confused with an otter) which would wipe out an entire stretch or pond.



# Other Otters

There are 13 species of otter around the world, but in the UK, we only have one type, the Eurasian otter. People sometimes mistakenly call those in Scotland 'Sea otter', as they live on the coast and hunt in the sea. But they are the same species of otter found here in Derbyshire. The main difference is their behaviour. Whilst across England they tend to be nocturnal, those found along the coast of Scotland revolve their daily lives around the tide instead. Coastal- dwelling otter still need access to freshwater, usually pools, as well, as they need to keep their thick coat in good condition and free of salt.



## Sea Otters

- Sea otters, usually mothers and pups, hold hands whilst floating on their backs instead so they don't drift apart. How cute! They will also wrap themselves in seaweed or kelp when they sleep (this is called a raft) because it acts like an anchor to prevent them from floating out too far to sea.
- Sea otter pups sleep on top of their mother's belly and the mother floats on the water.

## Giant Otter

- The biggest otter species is the giant otter, which definitely lives up to its name!
- Found in South America, especially along the Amazon River, they can grow to 6 feet and weigh up to 75 pounds. They eat 9 pounds of food each day.





**Derbyshire**  
Wildlife Trust

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# About Derbyshire Wildlife Trust

**We are a small charity with big ideas.**

We want to help nature recover from the decline that, for decades, has been the staple diet of scientific studies and news stories.

We believe passionately that wildlife and natural processes need to have space to thrive, beyond designated nature reserves and other protected sites. To achieve this it is vital that the richest wildlife sites are protected and sustained as a starting point from which nature can spread back into our wider landscapes.

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