

THREATS AND CONSERVATION

The Eurasian Otter declined throughout Britain because of chemical pollution, habitat loss and disturbance. Even today with all the protection measures the otter is under much more threat than it was 50 years ago. Although at present we have healthy populations in our area we should not be complacent as populations can decline rapidly and already many threats are effecting our otters.

By far the greatest causes of non-natural mortality are road deaths; some die in lobster pots, especially the young as they go after the bait; large scale conifer plantations cause an increase in acidity of the water and there is a chemical bombardment of fertilisers.

But possibly the greatest threat in our area is the risk of an oil spill. The Minch waters between Skye and the Outer Hebrides is still a major oil tanker route and it is argued by many that a spillage is just waiting to happen. In 1993 the Braer went down off Shetland and otters were effected.

The Eurasian Otter is protected by the Wildlife and Countryside Act and the European Habitats Directive. It is an offence to kill or disturb an otter, or to destroy its holt (home).

WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP

- Otter Watch – if you see an otter tell us where, when, how many (adults/cubs), and what they were doing. (If possible give us a national grid reference).
- If you find a dead otter, please tell us as soon as possible because if it is in a suitable condition we can arrange a post mortem examination.
- Contact us at once if you find an injured or orphaned otter.
- Above all avoid disturbance.



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The International Otter Survival Fund was inspired by observing otters in their true natural environment in the Hebrides. Because the otter lives on land and in the water and is at the peak of the food chain it is an ambassador species to a first class environment. IOSF was set up in 1993 to protect and help the 13 species of otter worldwide, which will also ensure that we have a healthy environment for all species, including our own.

To achieve our aims we have many activities:

- **Otter Hospital** – on Skye we care for injured and orphaned otters from throughout Britain
- **Education** – through courses, talks and educational material
- **Research** – otter surveys and work to reduce otter deaths on the road
- **International projects** include the Marine Otter (Chile), Spotted Necked Otter (Kenya), Eurasian Otter (Ireland), Hairy Nosed Otter (Cambodia).

To support our work please make a donation or shop for special "ottery" gifts at our online Otter Shop.

International Otter Survival Fund

7 Black Park, Broadford, Isle of Skye IV49 9DE

Tel/Fax: 01471 822487

Emergency Line: 0792 653 7436

email: iosf@otter.org

www.otter.org



designed & printed by Strath Print, Broadford, Isle of Skye tel: 01471 822.555



OTTER (Lutra lutra)



© Solvin Zankl

Otter-like animals have inhabited the earth for the last 30 million years and over the years have undergone subtle changes to their carnivore bodies to exploit the rich aquatic environment.

Otters are members of the Mustelid family which includes badgers, polecats, martens, weasels, stoats and mink.

Otters occur throughout the Highlands and Islands and are found along the coast and in freshwater lochs and rivers.

We are privileged to possess some of the best populations of the Eurasian Otter in the world because of the rich abundance of food and unspoilt habitat.



WHAT IS AN OTTER?

The Eurasian Otter is one of the largest of the European Mustelids and a full grown dog otter can weigh up to 10 kg and be up to 1.2m long. They have a characteristic "humped back" outline with the back held high and the head low down when travelling on land. In water they swim low with just their eyes, nose and ears above water level.

The fur of the otter is dark brown, with a paler patch on the throat. It is very thick and allows the animal to stay in cold water for long periods of time. The fur is of two types: an inner downy layer for warmth and an outer waterproof layer.

As otters can only hold their breath for up to two minutes they only dive for short periods of time. When foraging around the coastline they spend an average of 20 seconds on a dive compared with a seal which can stay down for 20 minutes.

The otter's diet consists mainly of small bottom-living fish such as blenny, butterfish and rockling but they will also eat frogs and toads, seabirds and small mammals.

LIFE HISTORY

Although otter cubs can be born at any time of the year, we find here that there is a definite preference for spring or late autumn. On average 2 or 3 cubs are born, weighing only 100g, covered in a pale grey fur and with closed eyes. They develop slowly and the eyes open at five weeks. By seven weeks they start to take solid food and can also run, and it is at this time that they venture from the holt to toilet outside but they will not go much further until they are 10 weeks old. They are fully weaned at 14 weeks.

Strangely enough, young otters are not natural swimmers and their fluffy coat is bouyant making diving difficult, so they are often dragged into the water by the mother at about 16 weeks old when they soon learn to catch their own food. However, they are still dependent on mum and will stay with her for 12-15 months.

OTTER WATCH

Otter Watch is a practical project which is co-ordinating UK otter sightings both alive and dead.

Please remember otters are very vulnerable to disturbance so respect the habitat and do not leave litter. If you are fortunate enough to see an otter in the wild, just watch quietly and enjoy but do not try to get closer and closer until you frighten it away. The otter will probably be trying to feed and if you disturb it then it will only have to waste valuable energy to hunt again elsewhere.



Spraint: This is the name given to the otter's droppings which are black, blackish green or brown. They are deposited on conspicuous points to mark out a home range. These regular sprainting sites become bright green grassy lumps which are easily spotted.

Tracks: Unlike the dog which has the fifth claw part-way up the leg, the otter print has five toes with clear webbing marks.



Otter Runs: These often form tunnels in long grass and can be found going inland from the coast with spraint deposited at various points along them.