



Otter (European)

Otter:

Lutra lutra



Size:

male (dog): head and body up to 90cm (36 in); tail 40 cm (16in). Female (bitch) is smaller.

Life-span:

uncertain - perhaps 9-10 years in the wild; have lived to be 20 in captivity.

Food:

mainly fish - eels are a favourite; also frogs, birds, small mammals, crustaceans, aquatic insects.

Habitat:

mainly the area around freshwater lakes, rivers, some coasts - as long as they are undisturbed and there is plenty of cover.

Distribution:

the European otter exists in scattered populations in the British Isles, Europe, Scandinavia, most of the USSR and North Africa. In the British Isles, they are found mainly on the coast of Scotland and Ireland, along the Welsh borders, the South-west and East Anglia.

Description:

streamline, tapering body and tail, ideal for fast swimming. Brown with paler underparts. Short, strong legs and webbed feet. Small ears and broad flat head. Ears, eyes and nostrils are set on top of head to help surface swimming.

The otter is an appealing, playful animal but unfortunately few people ever see a wild otter in Britain. Until the 1950s they could be found throughout most of the country but today they are very rare.

Otter Habits**Territory:**

the otter is a shy, solitary animal and needs a large territory. One male has a territory of about 19km (12mls) of clean, undisturbed riverbank. It regularly patrols the territory, marking it here and there with droppings called 'spraints'. These have a scent which tells other otters that the territory is already occupied. Female otters with cubs live in a smaller territory within the male's territory, who is usually the cubs' father.

Daily Life:

otters are mainly nocturnal and hunt in open, marshy places, rivers, lakes, seashores and estuaries. They will often travel a long way overland, from one river system to another, in search of food. They are strong, agile swimmers and catch fish by chasing them underwater. They grip the prey with sharp teeth and powerful jaws, carrying the catch ashore to eat it. An adult otter needs to eat 20 per cent of its body weight in food every day - about 2.5kg.

In undisturbed areas an otter often spends part of the day playing away from water, near to a 'lying up' den, which is usually under riverside tree roots.

An otter grooms itself frequently and this keeps its coat sleek and waterproof. The coat's long, stiff guard hairs are covered with oil to repel water. The thick underfur traps an insulating layer of air and the skin never gets wet.

Breeding:

otters breed throughout the year. The dog and bitch live separate lives, meeting only for mating. Usually there are two or more females living in a male's territory and when they are receptive, he will mate with all of them. They find each other by scent and by whistling. The two often playfully chase each other and pretend to fight.

The gestation period is about 62 days and during this time the bitch builds a holt, an underground burrow, often under the roots of a waterside tree. In Scotland, where otters frequent seashores and lochs, the holt may be in a more open space such as a rocky cairn. The holt is lined with grass or moss and this is where a litter of two or three cubs is born. At birth they are about 12cm in length and are covered in very fine grey fur; their eyes open when they are four or five weeks old. The cubs are helpless for the first 6 weeks of their lives, relying entirely on their mother's milk. The mother drives the father away as soon as the cubs are born and he plays no part in their upbringing.

The cubs develop an adult waterproof coat at two or three months and this is when their mother teaches them to swim. To begin with they are often reluctant to go into the water and may have to be pushed in! An otter family is very playful and enjoys sliding games, using a steep snowy or muddy river bank to toboggan down on their chests, forepaws tucked in! The young soon become proficient underwater hunters and the family splits up when the cubs are about a year old. They may stay on in the mother's territory for a few more months and then leave to look for territories of their own.

Otters and Man

Otters were once hunted for their fur and were thought of as a pest, competing with fishermen for fish. Otter-hunting with hounds was banned in the 1960s. In spite of these pressures, otters were widespread throughout Britain and the population remained steady until the 1950s when it declined rapidly. They are now rare or absent from lowland areas of England such as the midlands and the south.

The main reasons for the dramatic reduction in the number of otters has been disturbance and pollution. Since the 1950s riverside habitats have been drastically changed by farming and building techniques in addition to clearing for drainage. In other words, riverbanks have become far too tidy for the secretive otter. Watersports have also added to the disturbance of waterways.

Pollution of freshwater habitats has probably had the greatest impact on otters. The use of pesticides was greatly increased during the 1950s, particularly aldrin and dieldrin. These were washed off the land into rivers etc. and contaminated fish with tiny amounts of poison. Even though the fish may not be affected, the poison gradually accumulates in an otter eating a lot of fish, resulting in its death. Although most of these pesticides have been restricted since 1962, otter numbers have not increased a great deal.

Otters have been protected by law since 1981 but a major threat to them now is traffic on the roads. Almost 70 per cent of otters found dead in Britain are killed on the roads. Most of these are males, following established routes through their territories which have been crossed by busy new roads.

Protecting The Otter

East Anglia is one of the remaining strongholds of otters; conservationists there are breeding them in captivity and releasing them into the wild. Obviously it would be useless to release animals into any river habitat and expect them to survive. Special otter havens have been established by landowners in co-operation with conservationists. Some artificial holts have been built where natural cover is inadequate and, of course, the water in the undisturbed habitat is unpolluted. There are signs that these measures will help to re-establish otter populations in at least some of their former haunts.

Otter Spotting

A sure way to see otters is to visit the Otter Trust (Earsham, near Bungay, Suffolk). If you want to see otters in the wild, by far the most likely place is Scotland's north-west coast and islands. The largest populations in Britain are found there. Coastal otters are frequently spotted foraging along the tide-line or swimming off-shore.

