

Otter

Lutra lutra



Description

The Otter is a large member of the stoat and weasel family, which occurs in rivers, streams, lakes, marshes and coastal habitats. Otters are opportunistic hunters that will take a wide range of prey, but mainly feed on fish. The Otter is a top predator in the river ecosystem and, as such, it occurs at a naturally low density. A male Otter may use up to 40km of watercourse. This would include main rivers as well as smaller tributaries, along with ponds, lakes, riverside woodland and wetlands. This use of a wide geographical and habitat type range means that a catchment-wide approach is essential to Otter conservation. Otters require a plentiful food supply. Eels are often particularly favoured. Amphibians and Crayfish may be locally or seasonally important, and small mammals and birds are occasionally taken.

Secure, undisturbed breeding sites and secure, undisturbed lying-up/resting sites are essential if Otters are to establish and maintain sustainable populations. One such 'lying-up' site is needed approximately every kilometre of watercourse. The decline of Otter now appears to have halted and sightings are being reported in former habitats.

National Status

Formerly widespread throughout the country, the Otter underwent a rapid decline from the 1950s to the 1970s, leaving the species absent from most of England.

Otters are now returning to many areas through natural re-colonisation, with the expansion of populations from Scotland, Wales, north and west England. This has been assisted in some parts by re-introductions. The UK Biodiversity Action Plan target is to restore breeding Otters to all river catchments where they were present before 1960.

Local Status

Historically, Otters were found throughout Yorkshire but by the 1980s were nearly lost from the county. South Yorkshire was particularly badly affected. However, increases in evidence of Otter activity have now been recorded in all parts of Yorkshire.

The Rivers Derwent and Esk were the subject of successful Otter release programmes by the Vincent Wildlife Trust and English Nature in the early 1990s, and it is hoped that these breeding populations will provide a source of Otters for neighbouring catchments.

A 2005 survey of Otters in Barnsley confirmed evidence of Otter activity along the Dearne Valley and there has also been evidence of activity on a tributary of the River Don in the west of the borough.

Legal Status

The Otter is listed on Appendix I of CITES, Appendix II of the Bern Convention and Annexes II and IV of the Habitats Directive. It is protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. The European sub-species is also listed as globally threatened on the IUCN/WCMC Red Data List.

Links with other Action Plans

- HAP3 Wet Woodland
- HAPI4 Reedbeds
- HAPI5 Ponds
- HAPI6 Rivers
- HAPI7 Open Mosaic Habitats on Previously Developed Land

Current Factors Causing Loss or Decline

- Water quality
Pollution from many sources, including agricultural run-off and heavy metal contamination, is a problem.
- Loss of habitat
Intensification of river management has led to loss of Otter habitat.
- Insufficient food
Associated with lower water quality, which results in a reduction in fish stocks. Particularly a problem as Eel stocks are very low in some areas.
- Accidental death
Road traffic accidents are probably the biggest single threat to the re-establishment of a thriving Otter population.
- Disturbance
Otters need some quiet areas for resting and breeding. Increasingly, these are becoming unavailable.
- Population fragmentation
Increasingly, populations are being isolated by new roads, canalisation, development and loss of habitat.

Current Local Action

- Yorkshire Otters and Rivers Project provides advice and undertakes survey work. LEAP plans include targets and actions for encouraging Otters.
- Development of wetlands on restored areas is providing new habitat. RSPB Old Moor includes an artificial Otter holt.

Proposed Local Action

- Implement recommendations from the 2005 and 2007 River Dearne and Upper Don surveys, including the creation of secluded areas through scrub planting such as in the Dearne Valley and protecting and/or fencing off existing areas.
- Advise all applicants for new or expanding fisheries of the need to provide adequate defences against possible predation by Otter in the future.

BMBC Planning Policy Actions

- Include habitat and species protection policies in development plans and/or supplementary guidance.
- Encourage the owners of riverbank industrial sites to safeguard any Otters present and to promote the expansion of the Otter population through habitat creation.
- Create Local Development Framework (LDF) supplementary planning guidance on Biodiversity and Waterfront Development, including the expectation that opportunities will be sought to improve and create habitat, rather than just slow the loss of habitat. A proactive planning approach should be adopted to retain native bankside cover, including dense brambles and scrub, and control invasive plants when brown field sites are redeveloped.

BMBC Development Control Actions

- Implement Highways Agency mitigation when upgrading old road bridges (Nature Conservation and Roads: Advice in relation to Otters ISBN 0 9529371 4 X) on watercourses including tributaries.
- Limit accidental killing of Otters by providing underpasses on new and existing roads where appropriate.