

CONSERVATION ACTIVITIES

- Replanting riverside trees removed during drainage schemes.
- Creation of bank-side cover and buffer strips along rivers allows the formation of dense bank-side vegetation in the form of marginal reed beds, scrub, tall herbs and riparian woodland.
- PCB use has been discontinued although they are still present in the environment.



OTTER

Our aim is to protect, conserve and promote the natural and built environment for the benefit of present and future generations.

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WILDLIFE

The Otter *Lutra lutra* is a carnivorous mammal belonging to the weasel family. The Otter is endemic to Ireland and was once found in most of our river systems. Otters are semi-aquatic mammals and are found along the banks of rivers, streams, lakes and marshes. They also inhabit stretches of sea coast and sea loughs. Males are called dogs, females are called bitches and the young are called cubs. Unlike other members of the weasel family the tail is flattened and tapers from its base towards the tip giving the animal an extremely stream-lined shape and making it an excellent and agile swimmer. Both front and rear paws are webbed. Oily guard hairs insulate the animal and prevent water from penetrating the under fur, helping to keep them warm when swimming. Males measure about 120cms nose to tip and females about 110cms, making them larger than a cat or small dog. Weight ranges from 7 – 16 kg (males) and 5 – 9 kg (females).

ECOLOGY

Otters are mainly nocturnal with their main peaks of activity around 3 -5 hours after dusk and just before dawn. They can be seen during the day in isolated parts of the countryside where there is minimal disturbance from man. Occasionally when walking along a river bank you may hear an otter plunge into the water as it takes flight. The only signs may be small bubbles of air on the surface of the water. Otters lie up during the day either on couches formed above ground out of bare earth or flattened vegetation, or within elaborately constructed underground chambers or holts. Favourite holt sites may be situated beneath the exposed roots of bank-side trees, crevices in rocks and under large boulders, or may be deliberately excavated. Holts may have more than one entrance and often one of these will lie under water.

FEEDING

Otters feed primarily on fish and catch their prey under water. They are excellent fishermen and their agility in the water is breathtaking. They generally eat out of the water, holding the food between their two powerful forepaws and tearing away pieces of flesh with their teeth. In some rivers, crayfish form an important dietary supplement and the hard outer exoskeleton may be found on large exposed boulders. In spring frogs, tadpoles and newts are regularly eaten. Carrion is sometimes consumed and an otter may take chickens, ducks and fowl where they occur within its territory.



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COASTAL OTTERS

Along the coast otters may be observed swimming through the water, in an undulating fashion, early in the morning. Occasionally a bitch and cub may be seen fishing the inner waters at low tide for food items. This can include rock-dwelling fish such as butterfish and blennies, crustaceans such as crabs and larger fish such as flatfish or sea trout. The otter will come ashore with its catch and constantly scan the surroundings while feeding. Dissected parts of crabs along the shore-top are signs of their presence.

SIGNS OF OTTERS

Very often the only signs we see of otter activity are paw prints on a sandy side-bar along the river margins or faecal droppings (spraints) deposited on prominent positions along its territory. Spraints are long, black, cigar shaped droppings from 3 to 10cms long. They often contain bones of fish or amphibians. They have a characteristic musky, almost sweet smell and are often accompanied by globs of mucous jelly. Sprainting sites

may include exposed rocks along a river channel, tussocks of grass and vegetation along well-worn paths, tree branches that cross these paths and bridges which often mark the end of one otter territory and the beginning of another. Sprainting is used both to demarcate territory and as a means of communication. Otters can distinguish between the spraints of different individuals and differentiate between males and females. This may be particularly important during the breeding season when spraints may be used by a dog otter to indicate the sexual condition of resident females.

OTHER TERRITORIES

Otters are territorial animals. They each occupy a specific area of a river, a piece of shoreline along the sea coast or the margins of a freshwater lake. The territory is travelled daily and fiercely guarded. Female otters usually set up communal territories with their young until they are old enough to look after themselves and disperse to find territories of their own. An otter territory may extend over only a few hundred metres where food is plentiful or range over several tens of kilometres. The size of the territory also varies depending on the sex of the animal. Males and females never share the same territory. However, male territories tend to be 2-3 times larger and may overlap slightly with the territories of several female otters. The male will mate with all these females over the course of one breeding season. Where territories overlap out of the mating season the animals will avoid one another rather than use aggressive confrontation.



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Otters will move around their territory both in the water and on dry land. They use well-worn pathways or runs along river banks that are often shared with other mammals such as badgers and foxes. You can also often notice the slipways or slides of flattened vegetation down a river bank that are used regularly by the otter to enter the water. In rivers dominated by large boulders otters will duck and dive between the boulders and catching unsuspecting fish.

BREEDING

Otters become sexually mature at 2 years of age. Breeding occurs at any time of the year but cubs that are born in late autumn and winter have a poorer chance of survival especially if the weather is bad. Usually the bitch only mates with one male, the union occurring in water. Mating is followed by amorous courtship involving chasing and playful games. The otters may remain together for a further 2 weeks. The female will then drive the male away and he will take no further part in the rearing of the young. The pregnancy normally lasts for around 60 days and the bitch will give birth in the holt to up to 5 fully furred cubs that are blind at birth. When they are around 3 months old their coats become fully waterproof and they are introduced to the water where they are taught to swim and hunt by their mother. The family unit may remain together for up to 1 year before the cubs are ready to leave home and the female to breed again. The young otters will travel some distance to establish their own territories and many die of starvation within the first year of their life.



OTTER



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OTTERS

POPULATION

The otter is found throughout Europe but in recent years has been declining in many areas due to disturbance of its habitat and pollution of waterways. Ireland is one of the strongholds of the otter and now holds one of the densest populations in Western Europe.

STATUS AND PROTECTION

The otter is fully protected in Northern Ireland under the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985.

In addition the otter is protected in Appendix II of the Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats.

The otter is also protected under Annex II and IV of the European Union Directive on the Conservation of Natural Habitats and of Wild Flora and Fauna (Habitat and Species Directive).

The Northern Ireland Otter Survey 2004 investigated otter occurrence at about 700 sites across the whole of the province. Signs indicating the presence of otters were found at 65% of the sites surveyed. This represents a decline since the last survey undertaken in 1981.

THREATS

- Pollution of waterways. Organochlorine pesticides and polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) used in intensive agriculture have been implicated in the decline of the otter population. These pollutants can be spread by the wind and accumulate in fish and other prey items. In Ireland levels of contamination have been found to be variable but generally low.
- Interactions with man, such as road kills, drowning in fish traps, illegal hunting and disturbance and destruction of habitat. Otters are sensitive to disturbance and will abandon territories that are subject to a sharp increase in human activity.
- Hunting otters for sport was outlawed in Britain in 1981 and in Northern Ireland in 1985. However, they are possibly still illegally hunted for sport.
- Drainage of rivers during flood alleviation schemes. This often involves the straightening and widening of river channels and the destruction of holt sites by the removal of vital bank-side vegetation and cover.