



Otter © Kevin O'Hara

Working with Wildlife

Otter (*Lutra lutra*) Species Action Plan

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Description

The Eurasian or European otter is a native to Britain and is one of its largest carnivores. A full-grown male otter averages 1.2m in length and weighs about 10.5kg. Females are smaller, weighing in at about 7kg and reaching little more than 1m in length.

The otter is beautifully adapted to its semi-aquatic life style. It has a long stream lined body powered by a thick rudder like tail and webbed feet on short powerful legs. The coat is waterproof and consists of 2 layers, a thick under layer of insulating down like fur and an outer layer of longer guard hairs that trap air to form an insulation layer between.

Much of their life is actually spent out of the water sleeping; with hunting bouts rarely lasting longer than half an hour. They are active at any part of the day but are usually nocturnal in reaction to the ease of catching the available prey.

Travel is made extensively along rivers, streams and ditches as well as overland. Generally the otter rarely strays from its riparian habitat, resting in underground and above ground locations. Preferring somewhere with good escape routes, they are often beneath tree root systems close to the river's edge. Other locations may be in drains, undercut riverbanks, and rock cavities or above ground in thick vegetation. Many sites are very traditional having been used by generations of otter. They have a large number of resting sites within a range, rarely using the same one for more than a couple of nights.

Breeding can occur at any time of the year with a very distinct preference for the spring in Northumberland. Between 1 and 3 cubs are born in secure surroundings away from prospecting males and floods. Breeding sites are again traditional by nature and are often in riverbank trees or away from main river situations on ponds, lakes or tributary streams. The cubs stay with the mother for approximately 10 to 12 months, in which time the male acts as both protector and sometimes

provider, particularly as the cubs grow. Up until about 18 months old, cubs will stay very close to their mother and home range before eventually finding their own ranges. Surviving the second year could see an otter reach 10 years old but generally their life span in the wild is about 4 to 5 years.

They principally feed on fish, feeding generally on the most abundant species available on the watercourse inhabited. Seasonal gluts are also taken advantage of as in the salmon run and spawning amphibians. In impoverished habitat they appear readily to adapt to catching voles, mice, rats and water birds rather than the usual fish species.

Conservation Status

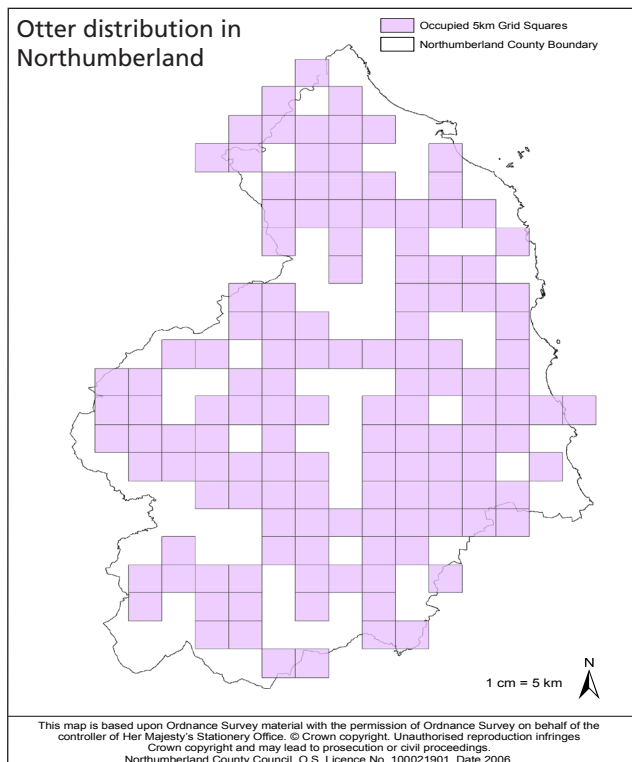
EC Habitats Directive, Annex II & IV
Bern Convention, Appendix II
Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species, Appendix I
Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981, Schedule 5 & 6
UK Red Data List 1993
UK Biodiversity Action Plan Species
North East Biodiversity Action Plan Species

Current Extent in Northumberland

At present every river catchment in Northumberland boasts signs of otter. In more recent years they have even started to populate urban centres such as Blyth, Morpeth and Newcastle upon Tyne. In many cases however, this expansion is into largely 'unsuitable' areas, which support impoverished prey resources and poor habitat qualities.

Improvements in water quality and habitat have been largely responsible for the return of the otter to Northumberland's rivers. This has led to its much increased distribution in the past 5 years. It has also led to the sharp increase in the number of fatalities on the region's roads as the population expands to seek new territory. It is far too early to understand what impact this will have on a population of animals that naturally live at relatively low densities but it is understood that the majority of fatalities are young, fit and healthy individuals.

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Current Factors Causing Loss or Decline

- Disturbance by boating, angling, dog walking and close proximity of urban areas
- Loss of habitat due to historical land drainage and flood defence works
- Obstructions such as road bridges and weirs restricting otter movement and encouraging them to exit the water on to busy roads
- Reduction in riparian habitat from intensive agricultural practices, grazing pressure and sites for angling which decreases available resting sites and foraging areas for otters
- Pollution of watercourses from fertilisers, pesticides, toxic discharges and sewage treatment works which reduces water quality and subsequently populations of prey species such as fish and crayfish

Associated Action Plans

- Rivers and Streams
- Ponds, Lakes and Reservoirs
- Fen, Marsh and Swamp
- Reedbed
- Saltmarsh and Mudflats
- Freshwater Fish
- White-clawed Crayfish

Further Information

This otter action plan links to the otter UK BAP action plan whose lead partner is the Environment Agency.

The Mammal Society otter fact sheet - <http://www.abdn.ac.uk/mammal/otter.shtml>

Targets

Maintain the current range of the otter in Northumberland of 135 five kilometre squares by 2015

Increase the current range of the otter in Northumberland to 185 five kilometre squares by 2015

Code	Priority Actions	Date
O A01	Quantify the maintain and increase current range targets based on the distribution data	2008
O A02	Keep records of road mortalities for otters	ongoing
O A03	Encourage the use of otter proof fencing on new fisheries	ongoing
O A04	Ensure that designated otter sites are properly recognised within River Basin Management Plans as required by the Water Framework Directive	2009
O A05	Ensure all operations affecting watercourses take account of otters, retaining features such as old trees, scrub and overhanging root systems	ongoing
O A06	Encourage the creation of log piles and construction of artificial holts adjacent to watercourses where the habitat is considered to be suitable for otters	ongoing
O A07	Encourage land owners and managers to carry out favourable management of the riparian zone to protect river margins and encourage the expansion of otter populations	ongoing
O A08	Identify and prioritise sites where suitable enhancement, restoration and management works may be considered to benefit the otter	2008
O A09	Promote the otter as a high profile flagship species to highlight the importance of water quality and riparian habitats to biodiversity	ongoing
O A10	Monitor the range of the otter in Northumberland	2015