

Otter (*Lutra lutra*)



Otter

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Otters are highly adapted aquatic hunters with long streamlined bodies, rudder-like tails and webbed feet.

Their principal food is fish, mainly coarse fish and eels, but they will also eat crayfish, amphibians, birds and small mammals. The otter is one of the largest British carnivores. Fully-grown males are normally about 1.2 m long and can weigh up to 10 kilograms. The tail comprises a large proportion of the body length.

Beginning in the 1950s, otters suffered a catastrophic decline, disappearing completely from much of England, Wales and southern Scotland. Their demise coincided with the first widespread use of organochlorine pesticides. Residues of these pesticides tended to accumulate in the fatty tissues of eels. The eels were eaten by otters, the mammals being then poisoned by the pesticide ⁽¹⁾. A ban on some members of this class of pesticides has helped the recovery of otter populations and they are returning gradually to many of their former haunts.

The otter is a shy, elusive creature, rarely seen in lowland Britain due to its being active mainly at night. They usually spend the day resting either underground in 'holts' or above ground in 'hovers' (or 'couches').

Main Habitat(s): Rivers, streams, lakes, wetlands and estuaries.

National status

The UK population is making a comeback from its 1950's decline but it is estimated that it will take 100 years before it recovers to its former widespread status ⁽²⁾.

The otter is listed in Annexes II & IV of the EC Habitats Directive (EC/92/43), Annexe II of the Bern Convention and Appendix 1 of CITES. It is classified as "vulnerable" by the IUCN.

Under UK law the Otter is protected by Schedules 5 & 6 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981.

It is a UK BAP Priority Species and there is a national Species Action Plan (SAP) for its conservation³.

Regional status

The otter population in the North West is being strengthened with colonisation by otters moving south from Scotland into Cumbria and north from Wales into Cheshire.

Local status

The extent of the otter population in the whole of Lancashire remains unknown at present. The Lune, Wyre and Ribble catchments have been targeted for surveying and monitoring. The Lune catchment is known to support breeding otters. Otters have recently been found to be using the Wyre catchment and otter signs are occasionally found within the Ribble catchment.

Current factors affecting the species

Otters need a wide range of aquatic habitats for resting, breeding and feeding. The loss of wetland habitats in the floodplain, due to factors such as development or agricultural intensification, reduces opportunities for otters to re-colonise.

Female otters, in particular, require areas of dense cover in order to raise their young. Scrub patches and reedbeds close to river systems can provide useful habitats, and the larger and more undisturbed these sites are, the more likely they are to be frequented.

Suitable resting sites can include hollows in large riverside tree roots. The removal of riparian trees reduces the number of sites that could potentially be used.

Another factor that may limit the ability of otters to return to catchments is the lack of self-sustaining fish stocks. 80% of an otter's diet is made up of fish, predominantly eels (about one kg/day).

Road traffic casualties take an increasing toll of otters. However, road kills are often the first indication that otters have returned to an area and the corpses of casualties can provide a valuable insight into the structure of local populations and their ecology. For this reason, the Environment Agency will accept otter corpses and forward the remains for autopsy.

An additional cause of accidental death to otters can be drowning in eel fyke nets. However, this is easily prevented if the nets are fitted with a simple otter guard. Otter guards are a legal requirement under Fisheries byelaws. Guards are regularly sent to eel netsmen with new net licences.

Current Action / Mechanisms

The Wildlife Trusts and The Environment Agency are joint lead partners in delivering the UK's otter SAP.

In this region, action is being taken by North West Water's and the Wildlife Trusts' joint 'Otters and Rivers Project' (NWOARP). This Project is supported by the Environment Agency, WWF-UK, Water UK and North West Water Ltd. It was established in 1998 to deliver national

targets on a regional level. A North West Group of the National Otter Steering Group was set up in 1998 and a work programme established soon after. A regional action plan has been drafted and most of the actions in the current plan are based upon this.

The Countryside Stewardship Scheme is recognised as one potential source of incentives to encourage riparian landowners to construct artificial otter holts and create habitat strips along riversides. An advisory leaflet has been produced for landowners in the North West, illustrating what they can do to help otters and providing contact addresses for more information.

NWOARP organises training days to raise general awareness of the otter in Lancashire and recruit volunteers for survey work. Volunteers trained by NWOARP are helping to survey sections of the Lune, Wyre and Ribble. This work will contribute to National Otter Survey of England, the results of which are due to be reported in 2001. The project also produces press releases focusing attention on issues such as otter road deaths.

One aspect of otter ecology in Lancashire that is being researched at present is the observed decline in otter numbers at one of their former strongholds at Leighton Moss RSPB Reserve.

Objectives, targets and proposed actions for otter in Lancashire

Broad Objective:	A. Determine the current distribution and abundance of otters in Lancashire.			
Operational Objective	Action Required (Priority)	Partners	Time-scale	Type
1. Set up a monitoring and survey system for all major catchments in the county by 2005.	1. Plan rolling five-year survey programme by end 2000. (High)	NWOBAP	S	RM
	2. Train a network of volunteer surveyors to carry out surveys. (High)	NWOBAP	O	RM
	3. Collate results and produce a countywide report by end of 2005. (High)	NWOBAP	L	RM
2. Ensure that otter corpses found are recorded and autopsied to give information on species ecology in the county.	1. Check that guidance in National Otter Handbook is being implemented. (Medium)	EA	S	RM
	2. Publicise guidance to appropriate staff in relevant organisations. (Medium)	EA	S	RM
	3. Continue to collect and analyse all otter corpses (Medium)	EA	O	RM
3. Maintain an otter database.	1. Create and update a database of otter records (to include	EA, WT, LCC	O	RM

	records of dead otters). (Medium)			
Broad Objective:	B. Maintain and expand existing populations			
Operational Objective	Action Required (Priority)	Partners	Time-scale	Type
1. Produce and implement Otter Habitat Management Plans for the Lune, Wyre and Ribble catchments.	1. Produce Otter Habitat Management Plans for the three catchments by the end of 2001. (High)	WT, NWOBAP	S	P, LM
	2. Work with landowners, key river managers and local organisations to implement plans. (High)	WT, land-owners, BHSP, NWOBAP, Ribble RVI	O	LM
2. By 2002 ensure that relevant policy documents take adequate account of otters in the Wyre, Lune and Ribble catchments.	1. Incorporate otter population data and conservation prescriptions into appropriate Local Environment Agency Plans (LEAPs). (High)	EA	M	P
	2. Review actions in current LEAP programme and add actions as appropriate by 2002. (High)	EA	M	P, LM
	3. Circulate relevant local planning authorities with guidance on otter conservation & watercourse protection policy by 2001. (High)	EA	S	P
	4. Complete by end of 2001 a review of planning policies on watercourse protection in Local and Structure Plans. (High)	EA, LAs	S	P
	5. By 2002 include actions for otters in relevant SSSI Site Management Statements. (Medium)	EN, EA	M	P, LM
	6. By 2002, include action for otters in relevant Forest Design Plans. (Low)	FC, EA	M	P, LM

3. Ensure targeting of agri-environment schemes in the Wyre, Lune and Ribble catchments takes account of the requirements of otters.	1. Review current practice re: Countryside Stewardship. (Medium)	MAFF	M	P
	2. Produce new guidelines for schemes as required. (Medium)	MAFF	M	P
Broad Objective:	C. By 2010 restore breeding otters to all catchments where they have been recorded since 1960.			
Operational Objective	Action Required (Priority)	Partners	Time-scale	Type
1. Identify 1960s range	1. Investigate old records of otter to establish range within Lancashire in 1960. (Medium)	LCC, WT, EA, former otter hunts	M	RM
2. By 2004 produce Otter Habitat Management Plans for all catchments in 1960s range.	1. Produce Otter Habitat Management Plans for the catchments by the end of 2004. (These should examine the feasibility of managing, creating or restoring suitable habitat to encourage expansion of existing otter populations into areas that were formerly used). (High)	WT, NWOBAP	L	P, LM
	2. Work with landowners, river managers and local organisations to develop a strategy by 2005 to implement plans. (High)	WT, land-owners, NWOBAP, S2S, MBC	L	P, LM
3. By 2005 ensure that relevant policy documents take adequate account of otters in all relevant catchments.	1. Incorporate otter conservation prescriptions into appropriate Local Environment Agency Plans (LEAPs). (Medium)	EA	O	P
	2. Circulate relevant local planning authorities with guidance on watercourse protection policy. (Medium)	EA	M	P

	3. Complete by end of 2005 a review of planning policies on watercourse protection in Local Plans. (Medium)	EA, LAs	L	P
	4. By 2005, include actions for otters in relevant SSSI Site Management Statements. (Medium)	EN, EA	L	P, LM
	5. By 2005, include action for otters in relevant Forest Design Plans. (Low)	FC, EA	L	P, LM
4. Ensure targeting of agri-environment schemes in the relevant catchments takes account of otters.	1. Review current practice re: Countryside Stewardship. (Medium)	MAFF	M	P
	2. Produce new guidelines for schemes as required. (Medium)	MAFF	M	P
5. Improve water quality across Lancashire to support otters	1. Strive to achieve Statutory Water Quality Objectives for standing and running water to sustain otters. (High)	EA, NWW, S2S, MBC	O	LM
6. Encourage sustainable fisheries management that is compatible with recovery of otter.	1. Continue to issue otter guards with new licences to eel netsmen to ensure that all eel fyke nets in use in Lancashire are fitted with guards. (High)	EA	O	A
	2. Analyse existing EA fisheries data to identify suitable areas to target efforts to improve habitats for otter. (High)	EA, LCC	M	RM
7. Ensure practice re: designation of wildlife sites keeps apace of knowledge about otter distribution in the county.	1. Review SSSIs designations in the light of knowledge of otter populations. (Low)	EN, EA	O	P, SS
	2. Review BHS designations in the light of knowledge of otter populations. (Low)	BHS P/ship, WT, LCC, EA	O	P, SS
8. Review effectiveness of artificial holts.	1. Map all existing and new artificial holts in the county.	WT	S	RM

	2. Monitor use of artificial holts by otters.	EA	O	RM
9. Limit accidental death or injury to otters on roads.	1. Examine all new road schemes to ensure that, where necessary, they include appropriate otter mitigation works (e.g. provision of underpasses and otter-proof fencing) in accordance with Highways Agency Guidelines ⁽⁷⁾ . (Medium)	HA, LAs, EA, WT	O	P
	2. Monitor the success of any mitigation measures installed in existing or new roads. (Medium)	HA, LAs, EA, WT	O	RM
Broad Objective:	D. Promote the otter as a flagship species in the Lancashire BAP			
Operational Objective	Action Required (Priority)	Partners	Time-scale	Type
1. Promote otter as an indicator of wetland biodiversity.	1. Continue the Sustainable River Project on a target river/reach each year, working with community-based groups to raise awareness of otter conservation issues amongst landowners, wetland managers and the public. (High)	WT, MBC, RVIs, land-owners, land managers	O	PR
	2. Encourage public participation in surveys and monitoring. (See A1 above). (High)	WT, EA	S	PR
	3. Distribute guidance on otters to relevant landowners and professionals. (Medium)	EA, WT	O	PR
	4. Undertake promotional talks to key river managers. (Low)	WT, EA	O	PR
	5. Include information about the otter in press releases, newsletters and leaflets. (Low)	WT, EA	O	PR

Related Action Plans:

- Rivers and streams HAP
- Reedbed HAP
- Water vole SAP
- Freshwater white-clawed crayfish SAP

References & additional reading:

1. Yalden, D. (1999) The History of British Mammals. T & A.D. Poyser Natural History, London
2. Strachan, R. and Jeffries, D. (1996) Otter Survey of England 1991 – 1994. Vincent Wildlife Trust, England.
3. HMSO (1995) Biodiversity: The UK Steering Group Report, Volume 2 Action Plans. Pp 84-85.
4. JNCC (1996) A framework for otter conservation in the UK: 1995 – 2000
5. The Wildlife Trusts (1997) Otter Wildlife Action Plan.
6. Otter Biodiversity Action Plan: North West Region
7. DETR (1999) Design manual for the construction of roads and bridges, Volume 10 good roads guide nature conservation advice in relation to otters

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