



OTTER

Lutra lutra

1. INTRODUCTION

The European otter is the only species of otter native to the UK. It occurs predominantly in rivers, but can be found in streams, lakes, ponds, reedbeds, wetlands and coastal waters. As a large carnivore, it feeds almost exclusively on fish, particularly eels, but amphibians, birds and small mammals will also occasionally be taken.



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Often the only indications of the presence of this rare

and elusive creature are its 'spraints' (droppings). These spraints are used to mark their territories, which can extend to as much as 40km.

Otters live in 'holts'. These resting sites may include the tree roots of large riverside trees, dense bankside vegetation and reedbeds. An individual otter can have up to 30 of these resting sites, only the most secure of which will be used as a breeding den.

Otters are indicators of a healthy river system, where the water is relatively unpolluted, with good fish stocks and bankside vegetation. By protecting otters we naturally safeguard the habitats they rely on, including rivers, reedbeds and ponds, and thus in turn protect other species which are dependent on these wetlands.

2. OUR OBJECTIVES & TARGETS

Target

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| A. Increase, through natural re-colonisation, the size of the population to 50% of sites surveyed in the 2000 Avon Catchment survey. | 2010 |
| B. Increase the range by restoring breeding otters to all main sub-catchments in the sub-region. | 2010 |

ASSOCIATED HABITAT PLANS

- Rivers & Streams
- Reedbeds
- Canals

ASSOCIATED SPECIES PLANS

- Water Vole

3. NATIONAL BAP OBJECTIVES & TARGETS

- *Maintain and expand existing otter populations*
- *By 2010, restore breeding otters to all catchments and coastal areas where they have been recorded since 1960.*

4. CURRENT STATUS

Formerly widespread throughout the UK, the otter (*Lutra lutra*) suffered a major decline in numbers from the 1950s to the 1970s, and was lost from much of lowland England, including their sub-region. Further to the introduction of legal protection, bans on toxic organochlorine chemicals, and positive habitat enhancements, the decline now appears to have reversed and the species is re-colonising former haunts.

Surveys indicate a trend in otter re-colonisation from west to east through both the Severn and Trent catchments. In Warwickshire signs of otter activity have been found in the Avon and Tame catchments and on the River Blythe (Jones,2001). However, while these surveys indicate an expansion in distribution in the last decade, it is likely that the population remains small (with numbers in single figures), dispersed and transient. Despite this, evidence suggests that otters have recently bred in Warwickshire.

4.1 Legal and Policy Status

The Otter is currently listed on Annexes II and V of the Habitats Directive, Appendix II of the Bern Convention and Appendix I of CITES. It is protected under Schedule 5 of the Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981 (which outlaws killing, taking, keeping or trading in otters), and Schedule 2 of the Conservation (Natural Habitats etc) Regulations 1994. The European sub-species is also listed as globally threatened on the IUCN Red Data List.

As a European Protected Species listed in Annex IV to EC Directive 92/43/EEC ('the Habitats Directive'), otters are protected by the Conservation (Natural Habitats &c.) Regulations 1994 which transposes the Habitats Directive into UK law. It is an offence to deliberately capture, kill or disturb a European Protected Species, or to recklessly damage or destroy the breeding site or resting place of such an animal.

Every competent authority (Minister, government department, public or statutory undertaker, public body of any description or person holding public office) is bound by Regulation 3(4) of the Conservation (Natural Habitats, &c.) Regulations 1994 to have regard to the Habitats Directive when exercising their functions.

4.2 Current Factors Affecting The Species

- **Degradation of bankside habitat features** – through intensification of agriculture, river engineering and development. Many stretches of river lack the dense emergent vegetation, scrub and trees that otters require as holts to be used for resting and breeding. Opportunities to reverse this trend include fencing lengths of river bank, planting trees and shrubs, and re-establishing other riparian features.
- **Lack and continued loss of extensive wetlands**, such as reedbeds, wet grassland and wet woodland (particularly required for breeding), through development and intensive land management.
- **Poor water quality** and continued pollution (both direct and diffuse) of some watercourses.
- **Lower than expected fish stocks**, particularly on the River Avon (the result of a lack of instream habitat).
- **Inappropriate water management** (e.g. over-abstraction).
- **Non-natural mortalities**, particularly on roads, as otters move between watercourses.
- **Disturbance through recreation** and other bankside / water-based activities.
- **Possible introduction of otters**, both native and Asian short-clawed.

5. CURRENT LOCAL ACTION

- Much of the work for otters in Warwickshire is undertaken through the Wildlife Trust's Water for Wildlife Project (which has one Project Officer operating in the county), including:-
 - Undertaking catchment based distribution surveys.
 - Providing advice to land owners and managers.
 - Undertaking practical habitat restoration and creation projects (including the construction of artificial otter holts).
 - Advising on mitigation related to developments.
 - Providing training and support to a volunteer network.
 - Raising awareness of otter related issues through appropriate publicity.
- The Environment Agency promotes a wide range of enhancements, relating not only to habitat, but also water quality, fisheries etc.
- The administration of agri-environment schemes (particularly Countryside Stewardship) has improved the management of riparian / wetland habitats.
- Partnerships such as the Leam Project (led by FWAG) and the Severn & Avon Vales Wetland Partnership (led by EA) promote catchment-wide consideration of conservation objectives.

Warwickshire, Coventry and Solihull Local Biodiversity Action Plan

- Major habitat creation projects are being undertaken (e.g. Warwickshire Wildlife Trust's new reedbed at Brandon Marsh, and wetland creation project at the Leam Valley Nature Reserve).
- Other organisations (e.g. Severn Trent Water and British Waterways) promote otters through appropriate working practices, the publication of corporate BAPs and the funding of projects.

6. PROPOSED LOCAL ACTIONS (some dates amended - Core Steering Group - Feb 2008)

ACTION	Lead	Partners	By	Meets objective
Policy & Legislation				
PL1. Ensure that all relevant policy is included in Local Planning Documents (see ODPM Planning Policy Statement PPS9) to safeguard and promote otters and their habitat.	LBAPSG	LAs	2003-2015	A
PL2. Consider the habitat requirements of otters in the management agreements of agri-environment schemes.	NE	FWAG FC	2003-2015	A
Site / Species Safeguard & Management				
SM1. Identify areas for river and wetland habitat restoration and creation for the benefit of otters (particularly through partnership initiatives such as the Leam Strategy).	WWT	BW EA NE FC FWAG LBAPSG LO	2005	A, B
SM2. Undertake practical habitat management works (including the construction of artificial otter holts) as appropriate at these sites, using "Otter Task Force" volunteers where necessary.	WWT	EA LOs	2003-2015	A, B
SM3. Continue to raise awareness of non-natural otter mortalities. Implement appropriate mitigation measures (e.g. underpasses on new and existing roads) to reduce impacts.	WWT	LAs	2003-2015	A
SM4. Identify and tap sources of funding to allow continuation of the Otters & Rivers Project.	WWT	BW EA NE FC FWAG LBAPSG LO	2003-2015	A

Advisory				
A1. Provide advice to key groups including landowners, fishery managers and local authorities with respect to best practice management for the benefit of otters.	WWT	EA FWAG	2003-2015	A, B
Research & Monitoring				
RM1. Monitor otter distribution through regular catchment based surveys, using the “Otter Task Force” volunteers where necessary, and distributing the data as appropriate.	WWT	EA BW	2003-2015	A
RM2. Monitor the effectiveness and success of habitat enhancements and mitigation works.	WWT	BW EA LA FC LO FWAG LBAPSG	2003-2015	A
RM3. Monitor the state of other factors likely to impact on the otter population (e.g. water quality, fish stocks), implementing suitable responsive measures where necessary.	EA		2003-2015	A
RM4. Collect otter corpses, sending them for post mortem and tissue analysis to Cardiff University.	EA	LAs WWT	2003-2015	A
Communication, Education & Publicity				
CP1. Using the species as a “flagship”, publicise importance of water quality and riparian/wetland habitat for the otter and biodiversity in general.	WWT	BW EA NE FC FWAG LO LBAPSG	2003-2015	A

Abbreviations: BW – British Waterways, EA - Environment Agency, FC – Forestry Commission, FWAG – Farming & Wildlife Advisory Group, LA – Local Authority, LBAPSG – Local Biodiversity Action Plan Steering Group, LO –Landowner, WWT – Warwickshire Wildlife Trust.

7. REFERENCES

Jones, M. (2001). *Otter Survey 2000 – The Distribution of the Otter in the River Avon Catchment* Unpublished (Warwickshire Wildlife Trust)

8. FURTHER INFORMATION (see separate **Links** web page for links to web sites)

UK Biodiversity Action Plan no. 428
Mammal Society Fact Sheet

9. CONTACT

Peter Sanders, Warwickshire Wildlife Trust, Tel. 02476 302912