

European Otter (*Lutra lutra*)



The otter is the most familiar animal of waterways in the UK. It was regarded as common 50 years ago but then underwent a rapid decline to the point of becoming absent from much of England. It inhabits rivers and other waterways with clean water, healthy fish stocks and well-developed bankside vegetation for cover and breeding.

1 Definition

Due to their secretive and largely nocturnal habits, otters are rarely seen in the wild. Their presence can be detected by distinctive field signs (spraints and footprints) and these provide an essential part of field surveys for this species.

Otters can exploit a wide range of aquatic habitats from rivers, lakes, estuaries and coasts to small streams, dykes and ditches. Their presence in a habitat is dependent upon the availability of food and suitable places for shelter and breeding. Otters feed primarily on fish, but other animals, such as amphibians, smaller mammals and birds, are also eaten at certain times of the year. As one of Britain's largest carnivores, it is a 'top' predator and therefore an important biological indicator of the health of our rivers and wetlands- a so-called 'flagship' species.

Otters were generally regarded as common and widespread 60 years ago but they subsequently underwent a rapid decline, becoming absent from much of England. The primary cause is now attributed to run-off from organochlorine pesticides introduced in the 1950s for seed dressings and in sheep dips, subsequently withdrawn from use. The four national otter surveys, carried out at seven-year intervals since the late 1970s, have shown that otter populations have been gradually recovering and this trend has also been seen from recent county-wide surveys of Suffolk.

Although otter populations in England are increasing, factors limiting the spread of otters are still poorly understood. It is likely that road mortality is a crucial element and also habitat quality within catchments is a significant factor.

2 Current status

2.1 National

The fourth national otter survey of England was carried out from January 2000 to February 2002. Signs of otter were found at 34% of the 3,327 sites visited and this confirms that the increase in otter distribution seen since the first survey in 1977-79 is continuing. Population strongholds originating in the west and north have expanded, whilst in the Anglian region there have been major increases following re-introductions. The scale of the increase varies considerably across the country but it is significant that the leading edge of the recovering population is continuing to expand. This appears to be creating large areas with otter populations at low density followed by consolidation which seems to occur some years after the leading edge has passed.

2.2 Local

Formerly widespread but almost extinct by the 1970s. In the mid-1980s a successful reintroduction programme by the Otter Trust was initiated on selected river stretches. Coupled with the withdrawal of organochlorine insecticides and cessation of otter hunting throughout the UK, this has resulted in a strong population recovery in Suffolk. Since 1996/97 otters have been recorded on every river catchment in the County, although it is difficult to estimate their abundance or breeding success. In the Fourth Otter Survey of England 2000-2002, signs of otter were found at 26% of the 728 sites surveyed in the Anglian region. In this survey, one 50km survey square (TM n/w) corresponded to the much of central and east Suffolk and here it is interesting that signs of otter were found at 40% of the 121 sites surveyed, indicating that populations are well distributed and appear to be recovering well in this area.

3 Current factors affecting otters in Suffolk

- Lack of suitable bankside habitat for shelter and breeding
- Insufficient prey due primarily to poor habitat quality and to a lesser extent, poor water quality.
- Incidental mortality, primarily by road deaths
- Accumulation of biotoxins, such as polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs).

4 Current Action

4.1 Legal Status

Otters are listed on Schedule 5 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and Schedule II and IV of the Conservation (Natural Habitats &c.) Regulations 1994 (which also implements the Berne Convention 1979, where otter is listed in Appendix II).

4.2 Management, research and guidance

The Anglian Otters and Rivers Project, a three year partnership during 1999-2002 between the Wildlife Trusts, Anglian Water, Essex and Suffolk Water and The Environment Agency, made a significant contribution towards meeting the Biodiversity Action Plan targets for otter and a range of other wetland species and habitats. This initiative has now developed into the Water for Wildlife project, which continues to play a vital role in implementing essential action for wetland species and habitats.

In 1996/97, a county-wide survey was carried out by Suffolk Wildlife Trust / Environment Agency, visiting 275 sites. This baseline study focused on looking for signs of otter beneath road bridges over the Suffolk main rivers as well as a stretch of bank either side of each bridge. The River Stour was surveyed as part of a separate study by Dr C Mason at Essex University, the River Waveney was surveyed by Norfolk Wildlife Trust. Signs of otter were found on all catchments surveyed and signs of otter were found at 22% of survey sites. This survey was repeated in 2001/02, co-ordinated by the Anglian Otters and Rivers Project. 236 sites were surveyed and signs of otter were found at 46% of survey sites (excluding Stour and Waveney). These figures correspond well to the data collected through the National Survey (2000-02) for central and Eastern Suffolk. This survey should be repeated in 2006/07 to monitor the predicted recovery of otter populations in Suffolk.

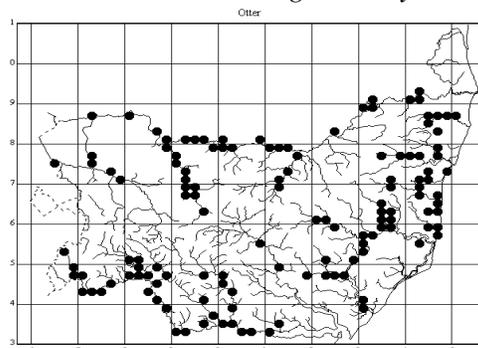
Otters require clean rivers with an abundant, varied supply of food and plenty of bankside vegetation offering secluded sites for their holts. Some are known to use 40km or more of river habitat. Riversides often lack the appropriate cover for otters to lie up in during the day. Such areas can be made more attractive to otters by establishing 'otter havens' which may include planting bankside trees, leaving areas as undisturbed scrub and leaving uncultivated buffer zones along watercourses and managing riverside land sympathetically. Wet grassland, fen, reedbeds and their associated dyke networks are also important habitats for otters. The creation of artificial otter holts can also provide valuable refuge areas in the short term, in conjunction with longer term habitat enhancement.

The Anglian Otters and Rivers Project reported that there had been an increase in otter road deaths during the last seven years. This may be attributed to greater movements of otters as populations increase, incidences of flooding after heavy rain and also other factors affecting the clear passage under the bridge. Road mortality may be a major limiting factor for otter populations within some catchments, but a safer route can be provided by the construction of ledges or culverts under road bridges.

Although there have been widespread improvements in water quality, there are still continued concerns about the potential role of bio-accumulating toxins in otters, such as PCBs, which may lead to impaired breeding success. As this species represents a critical indicator of the health of our rivers and wetlands, a high level of environmental surveillance needs to be maintained.

5 Action Plan Objectives and Targets

- 1 *Maintain and expand existing otter populations*
- 2 *Otters breeding in every catchment by 2010*



6 Otter: Proposed Action with Lead Agencies

Action	Date	Partners
POLICY AND LEGISLATION		
Enforce EA National Fisheries Bylaw regarding the fitting of Otter guards to all eel nets and traps.	2004 2005 2006 2007	EA
SITE SAFEGUARD AND MANAGEMENT		
Secure appropriate management of riparian habitats to maintain Otter populations through setting up of five 'Otter havens' each year on main rivers and their tributaries.	2004 2005 2006 2007	SWT, EA, FWAG
Continue to identify known Otter holts as riverine County Wildlife Sites and consider designation of SACs where appropriate in accordance with European legislation.	2004 2005 2006 2007	SWT, SCC, EN
Seek opportunities for habitat enhancement through EA flood defence maintenance programme of river maintenance.	2004 2005 2006 2007	EA, SWT, BA
SPECIES MANAGEMENT AND PROTECTION		
Cease reintroduction of captive-bred otters and promote expansion of existing populations by natural recolonisation.	2004 2005 2006 2007	EN
Limit accidental killing by identifying two black spot bridges per year where appropriate measures can be implemented to ensure safe passage of otters.	2004 2005 2006 2007	SCC, EA
Make provision for the safe movement of otters during all bridge repair and construction works. Ensure that appropriate measures to prevent otter road deaths are incorporated into design of new bridges.	2004 2005 2006 2007	SCC, EA, Local Authorities

RESEARCH AND MONITORING		
Collect information on prey productivity, biomass and pollution on main rivers. Assess sections of rivers most at risk from pollution.	2004 2005 2006 2007	EA
Collect otter carcasses to identify road death black spots and to contribute to national research on pollution monitoring.	2004 2005 2006 2007	EA, SWT
Repeat survey of 2001/02 in 2006/2007 to assess whether populations are self-sustaining.	2006 2007	SWT, EA
Undertake annual monitoring within all catchments to record otter activity.	2004 2005	SWT
ADVISORY		
Encourage provision of Otter havens by riparian landowners.	2004 2005 2006 2007	SWT, EA, SCC Countryside Management Projects
Provide advice to owners of still water fisheries to help reduce conflicts between fish farming and otter predation.	2003 2005 2006 2007	EA, SWT
COMMUNICATIONS AND PUBLICITY		
Use Otter to publicise importance of water quality and riparian habitats to biodiversity.	2003 2005 2006 2007	SWT, EA, BA