

OTTER FACT FILE

- Britain's largest predatory land animal, weighing approximately a fox-and-a-half to two foxes, and growing to a metre in length.
- They need a big territory as they use rivers, a linear habitat. DNA studies have shown that Somerset otters need about 12 miles for a dog (male) and 7 miles for a bitch (female).
- They are basically solitary, except for females with cubs.
- They regularly patrol their territories, marking them with spraints (faeces) on prominent sites. They back this up by nasty fights, if necessary.
- They are mainly nocturnal in areas with people.
- By day they tend to sleep in a holt (den) in a natural cavity below a tree root or in a drain or pipe. In warmer weather they will often also sleep in bushes beside watercourses.
- There is no fixed breeding season, but many cubs in Somerset seem to be born in late autumn.
- They are slow breeders, having two or three cubs, which they look after for a full year or more, so a bitch may not breed every year.
- They can live up to ten years in captivity, but in the wild only a third reach their second birthday, the age at which they start breeding.
- Otters eat fish, favouring eels and sticklebacks that make up over half the diet. They consume many smaller fish and also take amphibians, crustaceans (including the introduced Signal Crayfish), molluscs, invertebrates such as dragonfly larvae, and some birds.
- There are 13 species of otter worldwide occurring on all continents apart from Australia and Antarctica.
- The European Otter occurs from Britain to Japan and as far south as Morocco and into tropical South-east Asia and Korea.

Confusion species: Otters are sometimes confused with the introduced American Mink, but mink are much smaller, being shorter than an otter's tail, no bigger than a ferret.

SOMERSET OTTER GROUP
www.somersetottergroup.org.uk

DEAD OTTERS

Dead otters are a very valuable source of information about the species and the health of the environment. Somerset Otter Group collaborates with Cardiff University to get them autopsied. If you find a dead otter please report it immediately to Somerset Otter Group. It is illegal to handle a dead otter unless licensed, the otter group do so under licence. Recovered or not, all dead otters, with locations, need reporting.



OTTERS AND THE LAW

Otters and their holts (dens) are fully protected by law, against all forms of damage or disturbance, intentional or unintentional. It is an offence to disturb them by failing to take sufficient care, this includes accidental trapping of otters in Mink traps or fyke nets that are set without an otter guard.

Other Contacts

Cardiff University www.otterproject.cf.ac.uk

Sightings of otters can be reported to The Somerset Environmental Records Centre. www.somerc.com

For advice about how to prevent undue predation, contact the Environment Agency (03708 506506)

Suggested reading

James Williams	The Otter Among us
James Williams	The Otter
Paul Chanin	The Otter
Environment Agency	Fifth Otter Survey of England



Otters in Somerset

A factual guide



SOMERSET OTTER GROUP

The Somerset Otter Group is a loose association of active enthusiasts, who try to look after the fragile population of this rare animal. The group has recorded and studied otters for over twenty years, charting their remarkable come-back since the 1980s. Sadly these charismatic creatures are still vulnerable and the group's survey work is vital for monitoring the population in Somerset. The group works with researchers to monitor the county's population.

somersetottergroup.org.uk

THE OTTER POPULATION IN BRITAIN

The otter declined across Britain as a result of pesticides, now fortunately banned, to such an extent that by the 1970s the % of positive sites for the whole country was just 6%, mostly areas in the west, Wales and Scotland where there was less intensive agriculture. Since the 1980s the population has been recovering and in the last national survey they were found in 56% of England. They now occur in every county, the last one to be reached was Kent in 2012.

THE OTTER IN SOMERSET

In Somerset, the otter population has recovered from the nearly total wipe-out in the 1970's. Survey results suggest that at their lowest point in the early 80's Somerset had fewer than 10 individual otters on Exmoor. Gradually otter numbers increased and they spread east. The otter's recovery in Somerset has been natural; there have been no releases.



Spraint



Padding

THREATS TO THE OTTER.

Storm swollen rivers cause them problems, especially the cubs, which are sometimes drowned in the holt, or if larger, washed away from their mother.

An annual survey of the whole county is attempted annually. 73% of sites are positive, an estimate of 66 to 70 adult otters in the county. Although only an estimate, this figure serves to show that even though they have recovered otters remain a scarce animal.

Although the rivers are much cleaner than they were, post-mortems reveal that otters still carry a heavy burden of lead, PCB's, flame retardants, and other chemicals, all of which can impact their survival and breeding.

A surprising number of otters are killed by cars. Spates force otters onto the roads, especially at narrow bridges and culverts, and many are run over in wet weather. In 2011, 43 dead otters were recorded in Somerset, in 2012, 24, in 2013, 27 and in 2014, 25; a significant proportion of these were sub adults.

Otters are susceptible to several diseases, such as distemper, leptospirosis, kidney stones and tapeworms, any of which can reduce their ability to hunt effectively. On the Somerset levels there is a parasitic fluke which infects their gall bladders.



OTTERS AND FISHERIES

Otters are sometimes accused of being a pest to fisheries. Otters pose little threat to natural fish populations in rivers; the length of their territories means that their population is always sparse and they have little impact on the overall fish populations. Their favourite food is eels, and they eat a lot of small fish such as minnows, bullheads and sticklebacks. Larger fish are harder for them to catch, especially when the water is warm in summer and the fish are more active.

On ponds and lakes otters can be a nuisance, especially in winter when the flooded rivers make hunting more difficult, and the pond water is cold, which reduces the mobility of the fish. This is when otters kill the larger carp, which are torpid in the mud of the lake bottom. The larger or deeper the lake, the more likely the otter is to concentrate on smaller, margin-dwelling fish.



Whilst carp were found to be only 1.4% of the diet in a recent study, there can be a problem in specialist lakes, fish farms, or garden ponds where there is a limited selection of prey, larger fish are more readily available, and expensive losses can result. Such concentrations of their normally dispersed food can be very attractive to otters and sometimes attract a bitch with cubs, to teach them how to fish.

Electric fencing is the best defence against unwelcome otter visits. Being wet, otters dislike the shock, but it does not harm them. It is legal to deny otters access by fencing and the Somerset Otter Group can provide advice on fencing.

Trapping, killing or disturbing otters is illegal and will not resolve the problem, as vacant territories are soon re-colonised.

Adapted from an original text written by James Williams