

# PADDING IDENTIFICATION

**An Otter footprint found in snow near Dulverton Weir on the River Barle prompted a request for identification.**

## Otter Padding



An otter footprint close to Dulverton Weir, photographed during the recent snow. Taken by Philip Hull, Dulverton Weir & Leat Conservation Trust.

## Somerset Otter Group

The Somerset Otter Group undertakes practical work which will assist in the well-being of the otter and promote awareness of its needs.

More can be found about the group and their work on our website and facebook page.



## Otters on the River Barle.

Otters on most rivers in Somerset died out completely for a decade in the late 1970's, believed due to pesticides. A tiny few hung on within Exmoor to slowly spread East and recolonise Somerset's waterways. Today otters can be found on every waterway in the County.

Otters are not new to the River Barle, they have been monitored for many years by surveyors within the Somerset Otter Group. The Otters largely nocturnal nature and large territory, as much as 10 kilometres, result in them being seldom observed. Their presence is recorded by Spraints, otter poo, deposited prominently as a scent signal, often at the same sites. Also through 'padding', footprints in soft mud, or as this month, in snow near Dulverton Weir.



## An extract from the Somerset Otter Group's handbook for surveyors describes how to identify an otters footprint, 'Padding'.

An otters footprints are distinctive. Firstly, its feet are large, as befits a swimming animal, over 50mm wide (2 inches) and a big dog otter's print can be 90mm wide (3.5 inches). Otters have 5 toes, as do badgers, polecats and mink (all mustelids), whereas foxes, dogs and cats have only 4. If the 5<sup>th</sup> toe does not have an impression, an otters padding is asymmetrical and therefore recognisable.

### Otter Footprints



All five teardrop shaped toes clearly visible, short nails.



Frogman's flipper shape and webbing between toes visible in soft silt.

All the toes are rounded, (teardrop shaped) and they are arranged in a semi circle round the foot, with the first toe opposite the fifth along the diameter, a pattern you can make with your fingers in a "piano playing posture". Otters have blunt, short nails, so frequently these leave no mark.

The foot itself is similar in outline to a frogman's flipper, a cone shape tapering towards the heel, but in firm mud the heel portion does not always show. Remember that an otters back feet are larger than its front feet, as are yours, and do not therefore suspect two otters too readily.

Otters usually bound, or canter, rather than walking or trotting left, right, left, right. This means that you find four pad marks close together, then a space, then another four, etc.

A badger has big feet and five toes, but it has quite a different arrangement and foot shape. Its foot is a broad digger bucket, with all five toes, with long nails, arranged in a line along the front of the foot. The ball of the foot is a wide bar, at right angles to the direction of travel. You can make a similar pattern by running in bare feet across some wet sand, five toes at the front, and a broad mark behind them.

Mink, being smaller, have smaller feet. Their toes are long and slender, useful for climbing trees, so the padding is rather star shaped, with the fingers spread.

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