



# Otter Photography and Watching

## Background

The European Otter *Lutra lutra* is Britain's largest extant carnivore. The species underwent a rapid decline from the late 1950s but has fortunately recovered well since the late 1980s and is now, once again, found across the country. Being an impressive large predator people are fascinated by Otters and they are sought-after by wildlife enthusiasts and photographers.

## Otters and the Law in the UK

The Otter is fully protected under schedule 5 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981) and the Conservation of Habitats and Species regulations (2010). It is an offence to:

- Kill, injure or handle an Otter.
- Disturb an Otter in its place of shelter (holt) or resting place.
- Possess, control, transport, sell, exchange, or offer for sale or exchange any live or dead Otter or any part of an Otter.
- Keep Otters in captivity.

The punishment for conviction for such offences is up to 6 months imprisonment and/or a fine.

Notable permitted exceptions are to tend for an injured otter, euthanise an otter that has no reasonable chance of recovery, and collection of dead otters under licence for scientific study.

Any other activity that could be considered in contravention of the law would need a derogation (licence), issued by Natural England.

## General Considerations

Otters are easily disturbed by humans activity and pets. Human activities and infrastructure already limit the areas of habitat available to them. It is, therefore, important that any observation and photography is done in a way that minimises any disturbance to them, even when such disturbance would not be a breach of the law. The welfare of the Otter should always be the primary consideration. Although, some individual Otters can become quite tolerant of humans and these present fantastic opportunities for photography, it is important to remember they are wild animals and to not disturb their natural behaviour. It is also important to be careful about sharing Otter locations, especially if there are cubs or a holt, and we recommend that exact localities are not shared publicly on social media etc.

Otters have quite poor eyesight and do not see colour, but they have an excellent sense of smell and good hearing. In the field keeping quiet and downwind of otters will generally afford the best viewing opportunities. If otters are fishing then any movement should be undertaken immediately after they dive.

As all otter watching, surveying, and photography occurs immediately adjacent to water, care should be taken for personal safety.

Not everyone is as enthused by Otters as we are. It is important to not disrupt or harm other people such as land-owners, fishermen etc., as this can create or reinforce negative attitudes towards Otters.

## Recommendations for Otter watching and Photography

1. Make sure you are on publicly accessible land or have land-owners permission.
2. Otters should never be baited. This can alter their behaviour, and present a risk to their health.

3. Photographers should not position themselves or hides in a place where they could cause a disturbance to known holts or resting places. Vegetation and natural debris near any holt should not be interfered with.
4. If an otter starts vocalising at you or seems in any way distressed by your presence then you should immediately move away. There may be a cub nearby or you may be blocking its route.

**Recommendations for using Cameratraps/Remote Cameras for Otters**

Cameratraps are a very valuable tool for learning about otters and can produce nice photos of them. The information obtained by cameratraps is potentially valuable for monitoring otter populations and we recommend that information be shared with Somerset Otter Group (who are in the process of setting up a scheme for such data) or the Somerset Environmental Record Centre.

1. Remote cameras should be positioned and checked in daytime when otters are not present in the area. If an otter is present you should not visit the camera.
2. Cameras should not be placed into natural holts or known resting sites of otters. This would be a breach of the law.
3. If placing a camera near a known holt care should be taken not to alter the holt, access or area immediately around it in any way, this includes clearing vegetation or natural debris. Care should also be taken not to leave human scent in the immediate area.
4. Placing cameras at regular spraiting sites is a good strategy. If doing this care should be taken to not disturb the spraiting site.

*Somerset Otter Group is a loose association of volunteers that monitor otters in Somerset and advocates for their conservation and protection. We undertake an annual 2-day survey of the entire county, coordinate collection of dead otters for autopsy, and collate information on breeding. We advise and collaborate with government agencies in order to reduce otter mortality on roads. We advise and support fishery managers to minimise conflict with Otters, including supporting applications for fencing. We collaborate with: other county's otter groups or equivalent, conservation organisations including RSPB, SWT, and WWT, protected area authorities including Exmoor National Park and the Blackdown Hills AONB, animal rescue centres including Secret World and RSPCA, and with Cardiff University Otter Project.*