

Current Status - UK and Local

UK Biodiversity Status: UK Priority Species

LBAP Partnership area Status: Local Priority Species

The Eurasian Otter's world range extends from Ireland to Japan, taking in Europe, North Africa, the former Soviet States and the Middle and Far East. Formerly widespread throughout the UK, the Otter underwent a rapid decline in numbers from the 1950's to the 1970's. Populations persisted in parts of Wales, south-west England and much of Scotland, where sea loch and coastal areas still support one of the largest populations in Europe. The decline now appears to have halted and Otters are beginning to recolonise some of their former haunts, including parts of the LBAP Partnership area. Indeed, the Otter surveys of Scotland have shown an increased site occupancy in Strathclyde from 59% (1984-85) to 88% (1991-94).

Whilst the LBAP area only comprises a part of this wider Strathclyde region, this increase in Otter distribution is clearly repeated. Increases in Otter presence are apparent on the Black Cart, the White Cart and the Gryfe between the 1984-85 and 1991-94 surveys. Given appropriate watercourse and riparian management it is realistic to anticipate further increases, particularly given the relative proximity to the existing high Otter populations in Ayrshire and Dumfries and Galloway to the south.

Ecology and Management

Otter home ranges are large, particularly in freshwater environments. Otter homes can be called holts, couches, hovers, resting sites or dens. Each individual Otter will use a large number of holts within its territory and these may be above or below ground, in tree-root cavities, man-made cavities, rocks, earth or amongst dense vegetation. Breeding or natal holts are usually secure and away from sources of disturbance (e.g. flooding risk, people).

Otters are largely solitary animals. Territories, social and reproductive status are indicated to other otters by the deposition of spraints (droppings) at traditional or conspicuous sites within an individual's territory.

Males tend to occupy larger ranges than females and each male home range can overlap with those of several females. Otters are dependent on a wide range of aquatic and semi-aquatic habitats, including small streams, ditches and wetlands. The Otter's diet consists largely of fish and their food requirements are considerable to allow for the energetic demands of aquatic hunting.

Reproduction is non-seasonal, although there may be local peaks in certain months. Typically, there are one to three cubs, which remain in the holt for about two months. The cubs are weaned at three months, but remain dependent upon their mother for up to a year. The life expectancy of wild Otters is short, only three years on average. This combined with late sexual maturity often means that early reproductive success is critical to the viability of a population. Whilst many of the threats facing Otter populations are well known, the full explanation for this short life span is not fully understood.

Factors Causing Loss or Decline

- ★ Pollution of watercourses, especially by persistent chemicals (e.g. PCBs), heavy metals and oil
- ★ Insufficient prey associated with poor water quality
- ★ Impoverished riparian and wetland habitat, particularly the availability of cover for breeding, shelter and movement
- ★ Incidental mortality, primarily by road deaths and drowning in eel traps, creels etc. Road deaths represent a significant threat to recovering otter populations
- ★ Development on flood plains and wetlands
- ★ Conflicts of interest at trout farms and other fishing enterprises.

Opportunities and Current Action

Besides the general legal requirements for planning authorities and other agencies to assess the potential environmental impacts of their planned activities, there is specific European and national legislation to protect Otters.

The Otter is listed on Schedules 5 and 6 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981). Under the provisions of this Act it is a criminal offence in most circumstances to:

- ★ intentionally kill, take or injure an Otter
- ★ intentionally disturb an otter in its place of shelter
- ★ intentionally damage, destroy or obstruct access to a place of shelter.

The EC Habitats Directive, implemented through the Conservation (Natural Habitats, & c.) Regulations 1994, makes provisions to protect both a species and its habitat. Under these regulations, it is also an offence to:

- ★ damage or destroy an Otter shelter, whether intentionally or not
- ★ deliberately disturb an Otter.

Thus it is clear that holts and couches are both covered by the legislation whether or not an Otter is present.

There is scope for more detailed research into the current distribution of Otters in the LBAP Partnership area and this



Inverclyde
Renfrewshire
East Renfrewshire
LBAP



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OTTER (Lutra lutra)

Otters have a long, slim body, a skull with powerful jaws and show numerous adaptations to aquatic life. These include webbed toes and a powerful rudder-like tail, used for propulsion under water. Otters are capable of closing their ears and nostrils while underwater. They have two types of fur: stout waterproof guard hairs and a dense, fine underfur which provides insulation. Their fur is chestnut brown and is slightly lighter on the belly.

Head and body length: 55-110cm, Weight: 5-12kg.

should be combined with studies aimed at establishing the suitability of the available habitat. There may be opportunities to improve riparian habitats, perhaps through the installation of artificial holts and the adoption of enlightened riverbank management practices under agri-environment schemes. In addition, projects to help fish populations and restricting human access to one bank in a few particularly sensitive areas may well be beneficial to Otters.

As the Otter population recovers it will become increasingly important to liaise with local authorities, road builders and others to incorporate underpasses and fencing into new roads, realignments and extensions from an early stage to reduce Otter road deaths. Efforts should be made to raise awareness amongst planners and engineers of the needs of Otters and other wildlife to facilitate a shift away from hard engineering solutions towards a more imaginative and sustainable approach to river management.

The adoption of the Forestry Commission's Forest and Water Guidelines should eventually reduce some of the adverse effects of afforestation.

Although deaths in fyke nets are not a serious local problem, eel fyke net guards are available free of charge from the Vincent Wildlife Trust, and advice on Otter deterrents for fish farms is also available.

Current national initiatives:

- ★ The Joint Nature Conservation Committee has prepared a *Framework for Otter Conservation in the UK 1995-2000*
- ★ National surveys have been conducted every five to seven years. Local surveys by Wildlife Trusts and other organisations have established the present distribution and potential for future spread in many areas
- ★ Research is in progress on the implications of heavy metal and PCB contamination in fish and ecosystems
- ★ Conservation management (eg creating log piles, artificial holts, and developing "otter havens") has proved successful in many river catchments
- ★ The Forestry Commission promotes sensitive woodland management and expansion to favour otters, through the implementation of the Forest and Water Guidelines;
- ★ The government has proposed two sites to the European Commission for selection as Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) for their Otter interest.

Action Plan

This plan adopts the UK Action Plan for the Otter, with the following key objectives:

- ★ Maintain and expand existing Otter populations
- ★ Restore breeding Otters to all catchments and coastal areas where they have been recorded since 1960, by 2010.



Otter © Norman Tait

Objectives and Targets

- Objective 1 Maintain the current populations of Otter in the LBAP Partnership area.
- Objective 2 Establish baseline status (abundance and distribution) of Otter in the LBAP Partnership area.
- Objective 3 Restore Otter populations to their former distribution throughout the LBAP Partnership area.
- Objective 4 Establish population trends.
- Objective 5 Promote awareness and positive perception of Otters by relevant stakeholders and the general public.
- Objective 6 Review this plan on an annual basis, beginning in 2005.

We will achieve these objectives by:

Action	Actioned by	Timescale
Ensuring no net loss of species numbers or range	LAs SNH	2004-07
Recording known and reported sites in the area	BRISC	2004-07
Developing policies which promote management practices that enhance and restore suitable Otter habitat	LAs SNH SEPA	2004-07
Monitoring population trends	SNH BRISC	2004-07
Supporting educational and local community initiatives that increase the positive perception of otters	LAs Greenspace Projects SEPA	2004-07
Monitoring and recording actions towards these objectives	LBAP Steering Group LBAP Officer Local Records Centre	Ongoing / annual

Links with Other Action Plans

Broadleaved & Mixed Woodland, Rivers & Streams, Standing Open Water, Mires, Urban.

Further Information can be obtained from The Biodiversity Officer 0141 842 5281