



BIG FIVE KEY FACTS: THE OTTER



* the otter

Scientific name: Lutra lutra

Gaelic: Dòbhran (biast-dhubh)

Length: ca. 70cm (body), plus 40-45cm tail

Weight: Male (dog otter) heavier (10.1kg average) than female (bitch) (7.0kg average)

Typical diet (rivers and wetlands): salmonid fish, eels, frogs, toads; (seacoast) eelpout, butterfish, rockling, lumpsucker, crabs.

Semi-aquatic: They have many adaptations to life in water including webbed toes, a rudder-like tail, ears and nostrils that close underwater, a waterproof outer coat and an insulating undercoat.

Life cycle: They are fairly short-lived with 3-4 years being typical for a wild otter. Their usual litter size is 2-3 cubs which are born 9 weeks after mating, at any time of the year, except on Shetland and to some extent in NW Scotland, where most births in summer.

Cubs: Youngsters are raised entirely by their mother and live with her until they disperse at around one year old. They learn to swim at around 3 months old and she teaches them how to find and catch food.

Territory: They range widely (typically at night for mainland otters, more by day for coastal ones), including many kilometres in a single night along linear water bodies or overland. They mark their territory with dark, musky-smelling droppings called 'spraints.' These often contain obvious fish and amphibian bones and may be piled up in prominent locations.

Habitat: They are recorded in every 10km square of mainland Scotland, including urban areas, from rivers, canals, marshes and other wetlands (but they can also move overland between water bodies and wetlands for example along forest tracks and over fields). Coastal otters, which are often active by day, need access to sources of freshwater, such as burns or freshwater pools, to wash salt from their fur. Coastal areas without such water are unsuitable otter habitat.

Breeding dens: Their 'holts' are well hidden under tree roots, in holes in river banks, under rocks and in peat.

Status: They are scarce or absent from much of continental western Europe. UK population suffered major declines in the 20th century due to hunting, pollution and habitat loss. Scotland holds the bulk of the UK population and is of European importance for the species.

Prospects: Their prospects are good. Occupied sites in surveys rose from 57 percent of Scotland in 1979 to 92 percent in 2004. The Northern Isles, Hebrides, most of northern Scotland and Dumfries and Galloway are considered to be at or near carrying capacity.

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Spotting tips:

- ③ Coastal otters offer much better prospects of viewing than mainland ones, though hides overlooking some lochs can give occasional sightings.
- ③ At the coast, look out for the distinctive V-shaped wake behind their heads as they swim (the head the only part of the otter's body that is visible at this stage).
- ③ Stop moving, watch and if the otter dives (with characteristic lifting of the tail, which is then the last part of the body to slip beneath the surface), move closer to the water for 10-15 seconds, then stop again.
- ③ Repeat when otter dives to get closer to water, then stop. Keep a low profile.

Art & culture:

With their sleek, water-repellent coats, the otter was a prized source of fur until the mid 19th century and hunted for sport, with hounds, until the middle of the 20th century. They were also an inspiration for art from very early times, including the otter sculpted on the Pictish stone at Rhynd, near the River Bogie, and the contemporary sculptures of Laurence Broderick.

In the quest tale 'An Crochaire Lom-Rusgach / The Bare-stripping Hangman' an otter is one of a trio of animals that helps a hero.

The writing of Gavin Maxwell, especially in the international best-seller 'Ring of Bright Water', drew on his life with pet otters on the Scottish west coast. Maxwell's writing did much to inspire people about Scottish nature, even though his otters were from the Middle East and a different species from our native European otter.