

Celebrating the Return of the Otter

The otter (*Lutra lutra*) is a member of the weasel family, **just like the badger**. They belong to the *Mustelidae*. The otter has a very streamlined body and a powerful tail. Its webbed feet make it perfectly adapted to life in and around the water.



Otters have brown fur, with paler fur on the underside. An adult male can weigh in at up to 10kg, and is over a metre long. They swim very low in the water, and only their heads and back just showing above the waterline.



Otters can live for up to 10 years, though many only manage about 5 years. They are usually nocturnal and are very wary of people.

Otters live around rivers, lakes and, in some places, on the coast.

They also like reed-beds and marshy areas. They need clean rivers, with lots of different types of food available. They like to have undisturbed scrub vegetation on the banks of rivers, so that they can make their dens, called 'holts', there. Root cavities beneath trees are great for this.



A dog otter (male) can live in a territory of up to 40km on a river, and this might overlap with the territories of a number of females.

Otter droppings are known as 'spraint'. It is often found in prominent places, such as on boulders, logs and bridge ledges, where other otters can find it. It is a sign to them to say that an otter lives in this territory. Spraints are a bit like black tar and quite rough. They will be full of fish bones and scales. They smell sweet, (it's not a bad smell!) They can go white and crumbly after a while, but they never go mouldy!



Footprints can often be found on muddy or sandy banks. Otters have five toes. The prints are up to 7cm long, with webbing between the toes. You might see the claws.

In the 1950s and 60s otter numbers collapsed suddenly throughout the country. It was probably caused by pollution and habitat destruction. The use of pesticides by farmers probably had a lot to do with their decline. Our dirty and poisonous rivers looked like wiping the otter out!

The future for the otter is now much brighter. Otters are spreading back into many areas, and numbers in the North East have increased since 1996. Otters now live on many of our rivers, but are still suffering from some pressures. Otters are often scattered and they breed very slowly.

The Durham Biodiversity Trust has been working hard to help otters in the area by improving their habitat. They've also erected a number of otter holts. They've installed underpasses and mammal ledges on some of our bridges to stop otters from being killed on the roads. They have constantly surveyed the population to watch what is happening to our otters.

If you see an otter, you could let them know at Durham Wildlife Trust. They'd be glad to hear from you.

Info from Durham Biodiversity Partnership. Photos from Durham Wildlife Trust.



Task: Read this piece of writing with your group/partner.

1. To which family do otters belong?
2. Are they big or small animals?
3. Where do otters like to live?
4. How are they adapted for a life in the water?
5. What is an otter's den called?
6. What is spraint? What is unusual about it? Where would you look for it?
7. Why did otter numbers fall in the 1950s and 60s?
8. How have Durham Biodiversity Partnership helped the otter? What do you think about that?
9. What can you do to help?
10. Draw an otter. Look carefully at its features. Put in some colour. Look at the colour of its coat.



Take care near open water! Always go with a responsible adult!