

Name: European Otter

Scientific name: Lutra Lutra

Category: Mammals, a member of the Mustelid family

Length of body: 60-80cm

Length of tail: 32-56cm

Average weight: 6-8kg

Average lifespan: 5-10 years in the wild, 10-15 years in captivity

Conservation status: Protected in the UK by law.

Listed as 'Near Threatened'



About

The European otter, or ***lutra lutra*** (scientific name), is a **carnivorous mammal** member of the **Mustelid** family, which also includes the **badger, mink, weasels, stoats, martens** and **polecats**. There are 13 **species** of otters around the world. The most common species and the one that is **native** to the UK is the European otter, which can also be found across Europe, parts of Asia and North Africa.

Appearance

The otter is a large, powerful mammal, with grey-brown coloured fur, a broad **snout**, and a pale coloured chest and throat. Otters are well suited to a life on the water as they have **webbed** feet and claws to help them swim quickly through rivers. They have **dense** fur to keep them warm, and can close their ears and nose when underwater. An otter can use its tail to help **propel** itself when swimming at high speed, to **steer** when swimming slowly, and to help balance when standing upright on its hind legs. Males tend to be longer than in females in length.



Habitat

Otters prefer to live in and around clean rivers, filled with food and overgrown **banks** where they can raise their cubs. Their favourite **habitats** include **wetlands, rivers** and **coastlines**. An individual otter's **territory** may vary between about 1 and 40 km (1–25 mi) long, with about 18 km (11 mi) being usual depending on the amount of food available. From the 1950s/1960s their numbers were in **decline** but since becoming a **protected species** they are now more **widespread** and can be seen in almost every county. Locally, otters have been seen in and around the River Lune close to Caton, near Lancaster.

Diet

Otters mainly feed on **fish** (around 80% of their **diet**) but they will also eat **waterbirds, amphibians** such as **frogs, crustaceans** such as **crabs** and even **small mammals**, if fish are in **short supply**. When swimming underwater, an otter can use its **whiskers** to **detect** movements of **prey** in the water. They then catch prey with their teeth.

Breeding

A baby otter is called a '**cub**' but may sometimes be referred to as a '**pup**.' In England and Wales otter cubs, usually in **litters** of two or three, can be born at any time of the year. It takes around 9 weeks for a baby otter to be ready to be born. Cubs are normally born in dens, called **holts**, which can be under a tree in between its roots, a hole in a bank or under a pile of rocks. Its entrance may even be underwater. A cub is born blind and will be grey/white in colour. After 10 weeks, the cubs are ready to **venture** out of the holt usually with their mother. Cubs will stay with and remain **dependent** upon their parents for over a year. They will start to leave at 14 to 15 months old, and are ready to begin **breeding** at between 17 and 20 months old.

Behaviour

Seeing the signs of otters is far easier than seeing the animals themselves. They tend to be **nocturnal**, meaning that they prefer to come out at night to hunt. Although it is possible to see them in the day. Along **riverbanks** and **waterways**, it is easy to spot five-toed footprints (about 6-7cm long) and **droppings** or '**spraints**'. Otters leave spraints in **prominent places**, such as fallen trees, weirs and bridges, as '**scented messages**', helping them to **find mates** and **defend** territories. They contain fish bones and have a **distinctive, pleasant** smell, similar to jasmine tea!