



Otter Action Plan

Lutra lutra

UK List of Priority Species:
Scottish Biodiversity List:

Yes
Yes

Summary

The otter is widespread in North Lanarkshire and is found in nearly all suitable waterways. With continuing efforts to improve water quality the population of otters should increase further, as all suitable habitat is occupied.

Species Profile

Otters require clean rivers with a plentiful supply of food and bankside vegetation. They are shy, semi-aquatic, mostly nocturnal creatures, although they can be seen during the day in undisturbed locations. Their fur is generally medium to dark brown in colour with a pale underbelly. Adults vary from 1-1.2 metres in length, and 6-8kg in weight. Females are generally smaller than males. They are found in almost all wetland habitats including lochs, rivers, burns, ditches, reedbeds, marshes, estuaries and the coast.

An otter needs up to 30 holts (dens) or lying up sites in their home range. Large cavities in bankside tree roots, dense impenetrable scrub, rock cavities, peat burrows and old culverts are all examples of typical holt sites. One of the best ways to identify a possible holt is to look for their droppings known as spraints which are black and spiky and have fish bones in them. Footprints and runs are also good indicators of an otter's presence.

Their main diet is fish, with eels being a favourite, although they will eat amphibians (frogs are an important food source in spring), small mammals and some birds. An adult otter requires about 1kg of food a day. This high value is due to the amount of energy used hunting their aquatic prey.

Breeding is non-seasonal; therefore, they can breed at any time of the year. The female gives birth to one to four cubs in the safest holt in her home range. The cubs remain there for about 2 months and then begin exploring their territory with their mother. They will stay with her for 12 to 18 months before finding their own territory (the father plays no role in rearing the cubs). They are sexually mature at two years, but life expectancy is short, three years on average, although their potential life expectancy is up to fifteen years. Late sexual maturity, small litter size and a short life expectancy make breeding success critical.

Current Status

The Eurasian otter has the widest distribution of all otter species. Its range covers parts of three continents: Europe, Asia (as far south as Java) and North Africa. Originally the species was widespread throughout Europe, after the population crashes in the 1960-70's it declined in Central and Northern Europe and is probably extinct in the Netherlands and Switzerland. The population crash was largely due to pollution from farm pesticides and habitat loss. By the late 1970s the otter was almost extinct in the UK apart from a few strongholds in Scotland such as Dumfries and Galloway and the Highlands and Islands. However, by the 1980s otter



populations had begun to recover due to the phasing out and banning of some hydrocarbon pesticides.

There are still good populations in Portugal, Ireland, Greece, Scotland and the northern taiga of Russia. However, over its whole range the Otter is estimated to have declined by at least 20%.

The Scottish population is one of the largest populations in Europe and as the inland populations expand this population is being further bolstered. This makes our population significant in Europe, and globally. The population in 2003 was estimated to be around 8000 otters and there are 44 Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) where otter is a qualifying feature.

Legal Status

The otter is listed on Appendix I of CITES, Appendix II of the Bern Convention and Annexes II & IV of the Habitats Directive. It is also protected under Schedule 6 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended) and Schedule 2 of the Conservation (Natural Habitats, &c.) Regulations 1994, and the Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004.

This protection means that it is an offence to deliberately: kill or injure otters, capture or keep otters, destroy, damage or obstruct their den, disturb them while in the den, sell or advertise for sale, otters and anything derived from them, import or export otters, whether dead or alive

The above actions can only be carried out with a specially granted licence, issued by NatureScot.

Current Factors Affecting This Species

- Pollution of watercourses from industrial, residential and agricultural sources. Industrial and residential pollution of watercourses is a major issue in the Motherwell, Coatbridge and Airdrie area.
- Existing developments without Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems increasing the run-off going into the drains, overloading the sewage system so that uses the emergency overflows to discharge directly into water courses.
- Habitat loss due to development.
- Acidification of watercourses caused by acid rain and exacerbated by leachate from conifer plantations.
- Changes in fish populations
- Disturbance is still a major factor as waterways are increasingly used for recreation; people and dogs can cause major problems in some places.
- Roadkill – this is the single biggest source of otter mortality - excluding natural deaths. Many otters are killed on the roads in North Lanarkshire several deaths alone at Strathclyde Park.

Current Action

- Scottish Water's upgrading of the sewage infrastructure, leading to improved water quality.
- Scottish Environmental Protection Agency's monitoring of water quality at selected sites locally.
- Ongoing collation of Otter roadkill records.



- All developments affecting otter habitat are recommended to have an otter survey undertaken prior to development. If otters are recorded there must be adequate mitigation and compensatory measures are implemented.
- Open water SUDs ponds to create extra habitat for otter and cleaner water environment
- Provision / enhancement of buffer strips between developments and watercourses – for new developments undertaken during the planning stage.

Proposed Objectives, Targets and Actions

1. Conserve and enhance otter habitat.
2. Maintain and where possible expand the otter population in North Lanarkshire.

Action	Meets objective number	Action by	Target
Site and species safeguard and management			
1.1 Attempt to limit accidental deaths by providing road underpasses, dyke net guards etc.	2	NLC, SG, NatureScot	Identify key areas by end of 2023. Implement appropriate preventative measures by end of 2026.
1.2 Enhancement to riverbank vegetation, by fencing off to allow regeneration of riverbank habitat. Potential funding through SRDP and SEPA.		NLC, SEPA, Local land owner's	Identify key areas by end of 2023. Implement appropriate preventative measures by end of 2026.
Advisor			
2.1 Advise owners and seek to secure appropriate management of otter sites.	1	SEPA, SWT, NLC	2 otter related project by 2028
Research and monitoring			
3.1 Continue to monitor otter populations in key areas.	1,2	SWT, NLC, SNH	Annual survey of 3 sites.
Communications and publicity			
4.1 Continue to use this popular species to highlight the importance of water quality	1,2	NLC	One themed talk, walk, leaflet or article annually.

Updated by Kirsty Mooney, Biodiversity Projects Officer, NLC, 2022