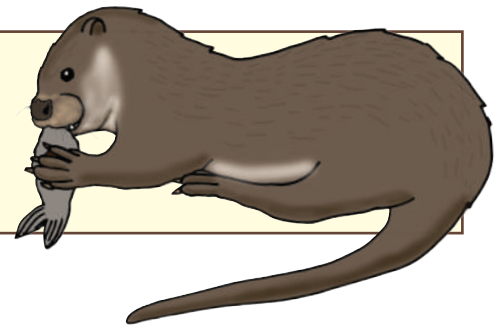


# Eurasian Otter



**Eurasian otters** are found in the wild in Britain and Scotland.

They are found as far west as west coast of **Ireland**, and as far east as **China**; south to North **Africa** and north to the **Arctic Circle**.

Eurasian otters in the UK are often active at dawn and dusk: this is called **crepuscular**. In many areas, like Scotland, they might be seen any time of day - this is called **diurnal**.

In the wild, they seldom live as long as 7 years, but in captivity, they could live for nearly **20 years**.

Their main predators are humans - **us!**

Scotland is an European stronghold for otters, and today they are flourishing here! Otters are mostly **solitary**, and get their food from lochs, burns, rivers and the sea. An otter must eat around 1-1.5 kg of food daily. A high proportion of otters live around the coast in **Scotland**; coastal otters are sometimes called sea otters, but they are the same species which live further inland. Coastal otters in Scotland are mainly active during the day and have smaller home ranges than the otters inland. Otters must keep their fur free of salt, and need **fresh water** to keep it in good condition and keep it as an effective insulator, so they only fish in the sea where there is enough fresh water nearby to wash in.

Otters feed on :- Mainly **fish** - eels, butterfish, coarse fish, trout and salmon. They prefer fat, slow fish! **Frogs** and **toads** in the Spring when they are spawning and easy to catch. Sometimes on **mammals, birds, mussels, crabs** and **crayfish**.

Otters have very **large territories** - 20 km of river bank for females, and a male's home range will include several females. **Holts** (an otters home) maybe used for shelter and breeding - an otter will have many of these in its territory. A holt may be a burrow, a natural hole or a hole in the rocks .

They also have resting sites , called **couches**, which are often in dense vegetation by the side of water. They can breed at any time of the year.

The male is called a **dog** and the female is a **bitch**. The young are called **cubs**. The biggest **threats** to Scottish otters are **cars**: many are killed by cars on the road each year, particularly where a road passes between two water courses. Mull Otter Group have put up signs to remind motorists of otters crossing the roads, and to tell people more about otters. Other threats are commercial **eel fishing**, and **creeling** for **crustaceans** because if guards are not put across the mouth of the creel to stop otters getting in, they can easily drown trapped inside. Legally, all eel fyke nets and creels big enough for an otter cub to enter must have a grid across the mouth called an **Otter Guard**.

# OTTERS EVERYWHERE

Otters are badly effected by **pollution** . If a river becomes polluted all the water plants become poisoned, and the insects which eat the plants are poisoned too. The fish that live in the river eat the insects ,and so the fish become poisoned . Who is going to eat the fish ? The otters eat the fish and they get poisoned too. If an otter eats one poisoned fish it may not kill him straight away, he may just get a tummy ache .. but if otters eat lots of poisoned fish, the poison collects in their bodies. This may kill them, make them go blind, and prevent them from breeding. Otters are also threatened by **loss of habitat**. People like to make the river banks tidy, and pull up trees and cover where the otters live. We also make too much noise with our shouting, and with our cars when we are in the countryside. Because of all the things which people do, most otters like to live in the more remote areas, where they will not be disturbed as much, and there is less pollution. Otters nearly became extinct in England. In the 1950's and 1960's very strong chemicals called **organochlorines** were used as **pesticides**. These got into the food chains of many animals, including otters (and us!), and poisoned them. People also used to **hunt** otters. This was banned in 1978, although by then there were virtually no otters left to hunt. Organochlorine pesticides have been banned, rivers are cleaner, and riverbanks are better managed to encourage wildlife. Now otters have mainly returned to the rivers they once lived. However, otters now face new threats. **Traffic** is one of the biggest, followed by pollution like agricultural runoff, and diesel spills. These kill the tiny animals in the streams, thus starving the animals that eat them, and the fish that eat those things - further and further up the food chain, reducing food supply for otters. The water from cities also contains various medicine residues, plastic microbeads from e.g. face scrubs, nanoparticles from things like sunscreen - all have been turning up in otters. In some countries, they are legally killed by **fish farmers** (such as Austria), and sadly there is still illegal killing in the UK.

## THE LEGAL BIT

Otters are **protected** by law. It is **illegal** to **hunt** them, **trap** them or **disturb** them. The otter receives the highest protection possible, as a European protected species - and its holts are protected too. It is an offence to deliberately or recklessly:

- capture, injure or kill an otter
- harass an otter or group of otters
- disturb an otter in a holt or any other structure or place it uses for shelter or protection
- disturb an otter while it is rearing or otherwise caring for its young
- obstruct access to a holt or other structure or place otters use for shelter or protection, or otherwise deny the animal use of that place

- disturb an otter in a manner or in circumstances likely to significantly affect the local distribution or abundance of the species
- disturb an otter in a manner or in circumstances likely to impair its ability to survive, breed or reproduce, or rear or otherwise care for its young

It is also an offence to:

- damage or destroy a breeding site or resting place of such an animal (whether or not deliberately )

## OTTERS AS INDICATOR SPECIES

Otters are an **indicator species** ... which means they give an indication about the state of the **environment**. Where there are otters , it means there are lots of fish and crabs for them to eat and the water is not polluted. So it is good to have otters around !!!

## WATER POLLUTION

How do you think **water** is made **dirty** ? We all use water to wash our hands, have a shower, use the washing machine and dishwasher to wash our dirty clothes and wash our dirty dishes after a meal . We use water when we flush the toilet. Where does all the water come from? When it rains the water is collected in reservoirs and cleaned before it is sent to our homes. Where does it go when we have used it? When we have made the water dirty it has to be made clean again before it is sent back to the rivers and the sea. Water becomes polluted when litter, rubbish and chemicals get into the water cycle. There is no new water in the world. The water we have is all the water there has ever been, or is going to be. It is interesting to think that when you have a drink today you are drinking the water which may have been drunk by dinosaurs! This is how the water cycle works. The rain falls from the sky and makes streams (**Precipitation**). All the streams flow into bigger rivers, and the big rivers flow into the sea. All the time the water from the streams, rivers and seas is being changed into water vapour (**Evaporation**) and taken back into the clouds (**Condensation**) to make some more rain (**Precipitation**). All the way the water is used by people in their homes, schools, and factories. Some factories dump waste products into the rivers and seas, although this is closely monitored. Some farmers spray chemicals on their land, and some of these chemicals drain into the rivers. All the pollutants which make the water dirty go around in the water cycle and can be very harmful to us, and animals in the world.