

THE OTTER IN IRELAND



The Irish population

Three national surveys of otters have been conducted in Ireland. The first in 1980/81 found signs of otters throughout the country, at 88% of sites surveyed. A follow-up survey a decade later found a marked decrease in otter presence to 75%.

The most recent otter survey, carried out in 2004/05, found that the species was still present in suitable freshwater and coastal habitats throughout the country. Nonetheless, otters had declined by a further 5% and were now only present at 70% of the sites surveyed (see Further Reading for full details of this survey).

The current Irish population is estimated at about 12,000 individuals. A further national otter survey will take place in 2010 / 2011 to determine whether or not this decline is continuing.



The otter in Ireland

Ireland has long been considered a strong-hold for the otter. However, recent surveys now show that the otter is not as widespread as it once was.

Dramatic declines occurred in many European otter populations during the latter half of the 20th Century. As a result, otters became extinct in several countries. While conservation efforts have reversed the decline in some countries, the otter remains threatened or rare in many others.



Photo: E. Dunne © NPWS

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Further reading

Bailey, M. & Rochford, J. (2006) Otter survey of Ireland 2004 / 2005. *Irish Wildlife Manuals* No. 23. National Parks & Wildlife Service. DoEHLG.
<http://www.npws.ie/en/PublicationsLiterature/>

NPWS (2009) Otter Threat Response Plan 2009 – 2011. National Parks & Wildlife Service. DoEHLG. <http://www.npws.ie/en/PublicationsLiterature/>

NRA (2008) Guidelines for the Crossing of Watercourses during the Construction of National Road Schemes. National Roads Authority, Dublin.
<http://www.nra.ie/Publications/Environment/>

Useful websites:

www.npws.ie
www.biology.ie
www.nra.ie
<http://maps.biodiversityireland.ie/>

Text: F. Marnell, NPWS
Design: www.slickfish.ie

Where do otters live?

Otters have two basic requirements: aquatic prey and safe refuges where they can rest. In general, healthy otter populations can be expected along clean rivers and lakes, where fish and other prey are abundant, and where the adjacent habitat offers plenty of cover.

Otters maintain territories and will defend their stretches of river bank or lake shore from other otters. In lowland rivers and fish-rich lakes otters only need to maintain small territories (1-2km), but on smaller rivers and in upland areas, where food tends to be less abundant, otter territories can stretch to 10 or 15 km. Along coasts otters require sources of freshwater to



wash their coats and their territories will always include a stream or spring. The point where freshwater enters a sheltered coastline is often a good place to look for otter signs.

An otter usually maintains numerous couches and holts within its territory. Couches are above-ground resting places, often on islands, or hidden in extensive reed beds, or in dense scrub, brambles or nettles. Holts are underground and can take many forms – among falls of rocks, in caves, excavated tunnels in peat banks, or within root systems of mature bank-side trees.

Holts and couches may be found some distance from freshwater, but most are within the immediate area of riparian vegetation. Along coasts holts are often found adjacent to freshwater streams or springs, as otters need to wash the salt from their fur.

Otters can occasionally be found some distance from a stream or lake. In certain areas the availability of frogs, particularly in springtime, will draw otters to marshes and ponds several hundred metres from their usual territory. Natal holts may also be sited some distance from the normal areas of activity. In general, however, otters exploit a narrow strip of habitat at the aquatic – terrestrial interface.

DID YOU KNOW?

The Irish for otter is madra uisce or dobharcú.

Otters belong to the same family as the stoat, badger and pine marten – the mustelids.

The scientific name for the otter is Lutra lutra.

Otters mark their territories with droppings, called spraints.

Otter spraints have a distinctive, pleasant smell, like mown hay or jasmine tea !

There is only one type of otter in Ireland – it can be found on rivers and lakes and along the coast.



Cornshaoil, Oldhreach agus Riailtas Áitiúil
Environment, Heritage and Local Government

What do they eat?

The otter is an opportunistic predator with a broad and varied diet. In freshwater areas a variety of fish from sticklebacks to salmon and eels will be taken, while crayfish and frogs can be important locally or seasonally. Terrestrial prey is taken infrequently, with birds occurring in just 3% of spraints, and mammals occurring even more rarely. In coastal areas rockling, wrasse, eel, sea scorpion, blenny and molluscs are known to be eaten.

Breeding

Otter cubs may be born at any time of year. They are born in natal holts. These tend to be especially well hidden, usually far from other otter traffic to avoid potential aggression.

The female lines the holt with grass and reeds before giving birth. 2-3 young is typical. At birth, cubs have short, pale grey fur and are about 12cm long. They open their eyes at around 30 days, but do not emerge from the natal holt for about 2 months.

They will suckle for 14 weeks and remain with their mother for 7-12 months before dispersing to find their own territory. Mortality of 50% in the first year is normal, but otters surviving their first year may live to 8 or more, although 3-4 is typical.

Threats to otters

Otters are subject to pressures on land and in water (freshwater and marine). Impacts that reduce the availability or quality of, or cause disturbance to, their terrestrial or aquatic habitats are likely to affect otters. The following are considered to be the main factors responsible for declines in otter numbers in Ireland:

1. Direct and indirect habitat destruction, including river drainage and the clearance of bank-side vegetation.
2. Pollution, particularly organic pollution resulting in fish kills.
3. Accidental deaths (road traffic and fish traps) and persecution.

A new Otter Threat Response Plan has recently been prepared by NPWS. This three year plan provides detailed information on the range, distribution and habitat of the otter. It also focuses on the particular threats facing the species and identifies the measures required to address these threats. The Plan goes on to identify who is responsible for implementing

each measure and provides a time frame for delivery. You can read this Threat Response Plan here:

<http://www.npws.ie/en/PublicationsLiterature/>

The National Roads Authority have published guidelines which aim to minimize the number of otters killed on our roads. Recommended measures include constructing special otter ledges where rivers and streams flow under new roadways.



An example of mammal ledges on a culverted stream under a road (Source: NRA)



Photo: E. Dumne © NPWS

Otters and the law

The otter has been protected in Ireland since 1976 (Wildlife Act 1976), although a limited number of licenses to hunt otters were issued under this Act until the 1990s. The Wildlife (Amendment) Act, 2000 removed the hunting clause entirely and it is now illegal to hunt, disturb, or intentionally kill otters. Otters are also protected by European law.

If you see an otter....

Please report sightings of live otters to the National Parks & Wildlife Service: natureconservation@environ.ie.

Records should include accurate information on location (preferably a grid reference and townland/waterbody name), together with the date of sighting.

Records of otters found dead on the road should be submitted to the Roadkill project on www.biology.ie

How to recognise otter signs

The otter is a large carnivore with a long slim body, short legs and a tapered tail. Adult males can reach 1m in total length and 10kg in weight. The otter's feet are webbed and it swims low in the water with only its head showing. However, you need to be lucky to see an otter, and the best way to discover whether otters frequent an area is by looking for tell-tale signs.

Otter spraints showing remains of crayfish. (photo: M. Bailey)



Spraints

Otters mark their territories with their droppings which are known as spraints. These spraints are normally left in prominent places such as on rocks and ledges under bridges. Large rocks and grassy knolls along river banks, lakeshores and coastlines, or where a stream enters a river or lake, are also good places to look. Spraints have a distinctive and fairly pleasant "sweet" smell (sometimes compared to mown hay or jasmine tea!) unlike mink scats which are often found in similar places but tend to have an unpleasant fishy smell.

By examining otter spraints you can determine what the animal was eating. Fish bones and scales are usually obvious. The distinctive remains of crayfish shells and claws, or at coastal sites crabs, may also be visible.

Footprints

Otter footprints are 6-7cm in diameter with five forward pointing toes. In soft mud, the webbing between the toes may be visible. Look for otter footprints in mud or sand under bridges or other sheltered areas near water.

Otter footprints (photo: M. Bailey)



Bridges are good places to look for otter signs.

In summary, you may commit a criminal offence if you:

- Deliberately capture, injure or kill an otter
- Intentionally or recklessly disturb an otter in its resting place
- Damage or destroy the breeding or resting place of an otter
- Possess an otter (alive or dead), or any part of an otter
- Intentionally or recklessly obstruct access to the resting place of an otter.

This is only a brief summary of the main points of the law, not a complete statement. Further details of the Wildlife Acts and the Habitats Directive under which otters are protected may be found on www.npws.ie.

The otter is listed on Annex II and Annex IV of the EU Habitats Directive. The Annex II listing requires Member States to designate Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) for the protection of the species. 44 such SACs have been designated in Ireland. These sites comprise extensive stretches of river channels and coastline (including off-shore islands) as well as lakes and blanket bog systems. The sites were selected to represent the geographical spread and diversity of habitat used by the otter in Ireland.