

# all about

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## OTTER

*Lutra lutra*

Otters are terrestrial mammals that spend much of their time in water, especially when they are feeding. They are quite large animals measuring just over a metre long and weighing about 10kg.

Otters are well adapted to life in water. They have a thick waterproof coat which traps a layer of air next to their body, helping to keep them warm. Their head is rather flat, so offers little resistance to the water and they have webbed feet.

When swimming slowly at the surface of the water they paddle their front legs like a dog. However when they swim fast underwater they hold their legs close to their body and use their hind quarters and thick powerful tail to propel them through the water.

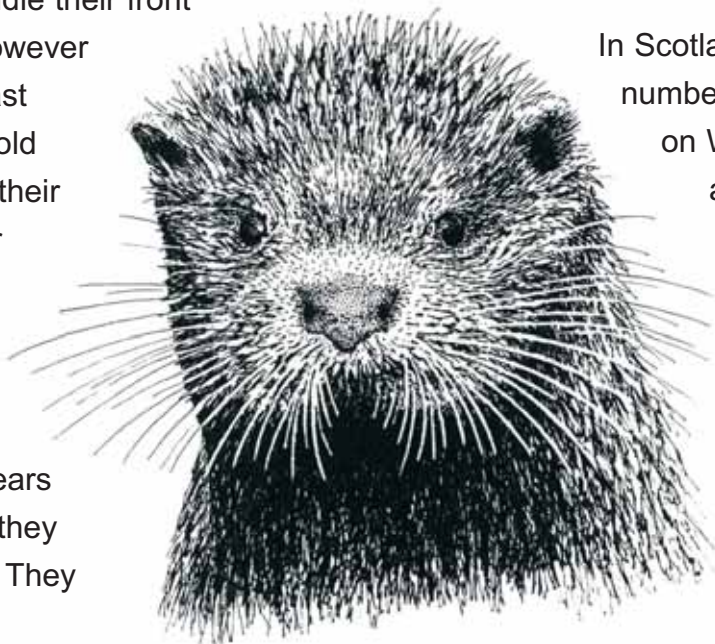
Otters close their ears and nostrils when they swim under water. They

can see well under water if the water is clear, but when the water is murky their whiskers help to detect prey by picking up vibrations.

On land they have a good sense of hearing and smell. Otters bound along the ground rather than walk. They often stand upright on their hind legs. People think of otters as playful animals. They sometimes make slides down muddy riverbanks into the water or in sand dunes or snow.

### Where do they live?

In Scotland the highest numbers of otters are found on West Highland coasts and islands, in the Western Isles and Shetland. They can live either beside the sea or in freshwater habitats including lochs, rivers and marshes.



Their holts are often in riverbanks, and are usually screened by tree roots and other vegetation. The holt is lined with reeds, grass and moss. Freshwater otters also use “couches” above ground to rest in. Sea caves and rock holes are sometimes used by otters living on the coasts. Freshwater is essential to otters living in coastal areas. It is used to wash salt out of their fur and maintain waterproofing quality. Otherwise, they might die of the cold.

### What do they eat?

Otters mainly eat fish. Those otters which live in freshwater habitats are particularly fond of eels, young salmon and trout. Those otters living on the coast often feed on eels, rocklings, butterfish and crabs.

Otters sometimes eat frogs, small mammals and ducks and other birds that nest on the ground. Small items of food are eaten in the water but they swim to the shore with larger prey or if they are feeding cubs.

Otters are well adapted for seizing, holding and biting their prey with powerful jaw muscles and strong sharp teeth. Individual otters may travel over large distances in search of food. Males generally have larger home ranges than females and a single male has been found using up to 80km of river. The average is more likely to be 30–35km for a male, and 16–22km for a female, but this depends on how much food is available. In the best coastal sites, otters occupy shorter distances (2–13km).

### Lifestyle

Large numbers of otters are never found in one area. Male and female otters usually only come together to mate. They mark their territory by leaving their droppings (known as spraints) in obvious places such as the tops of rocks and grassy mounds. Otters are usually nocturnal spending much of the day in their holts or couches, although those that live on undisturbed parts of the coast are active during the day.

Otters usually have 2–3 cubs. The cubs are born toothless and blind and remain helpless for 5–6 weeks. They start to eat fish at about two months but do not go into the water until they are 3–4 months old. Young otters stay with their mother for up to a year. The father plays no part in rearing the cubs and is driven out of the holt by the female before the young are born.

### Humans and otters

In the past otters were hunted for sport and their fur. They were also shot and trapped because they were thought to kill game birds and fish. Since 1981 it has been against the law to hunt, trap or intentionally kill an otter, or to disturb one in its holt. Since 1994, it has also been against the law to intentionally disturb an otter whether it is in its holt or not. The main threats to otters today are water pollution, habitat loss, disturbance by humans and being killed by road traffic.

The pollution of water by agricultural chemicals, sewage and industrial waste

harms the animals that the otters feed on and in turn the otters themselves. A fall in the number of otters in the late 1950s is thought to have been due to the effects of agricultural pesticides. Oil pollution kills otters in coastal areas by ruining the waterproofing of their fur causing them to die of exposure. In some areas, high levels of acidity in the water kills off invertebrates and fish, and therefore puts pressure on otters living in the area.

Removal of plant cover from river banks leaves no shelter or suitable sites for otters to build their holts. Drainage along peat coastlines means less access to freshwater pools, which is essential for fur cleaning. Otters may also get caught up in fishing equipment and drown.

Scotland supports one of the best populations of otters in Europe. In fact there are very few parts of the country where they do not occur. This gives us a special responsibility for their long-term conservation.

## [Finding out more](#)

### **Otters**

Paul Chanin (Whittet). 1993

### **Scottish Wildlife**

Ray Collier (Lomond Books). 1992

### **The Handbook of British Mammals**

Eds. Gordon Corbet & Stephen Harris  
(3rd Ed.) 1991

## [How you can help](#)

You could become involved with groups of other people concerned with the future of Scotland's wildlife. Check your

local newspaper or library for information about groups in your area.

Scottish Wildlife WATCH, which is part of the Scottish Wildlife Trust (SWT), produces a magazine and Scottish newsletter which include information about environmental issues and give you the chance to help wildlife by taking part in projects and surveys.

Contact: SWT, Cramond House,  
Cramond Glebe Road, Edinburgh  
EH4 6NS

A poster of an otter is available free of charge from Scottish Natural Heritage, Publications Section, Battleby, Redgorton, Perth PH1 3EW

## Glossary

### **Couch**

A resting hole or hollow above ground.

### **Habitat**

The place in which an animal or plant lives.

### **Holt**

An underground burrow, sea cave or rock hole used by an otter.

### **Prey**

An animal that is killed and eaten by another animal.

### **Spraint**

Otter droppings, often left on rocks or grassy mounds.

### **Terrestrial**

A plant or animal which lives on the land.

### **Territory**

The area in which an animal or a group of animals live and which they defend against other animals of the same kind.

