

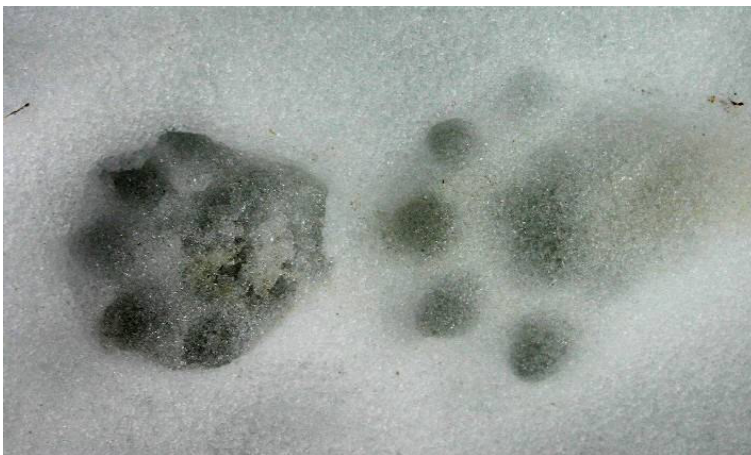
## Otter Fact sheet

### What is an otter?



Otters at Colyford Common, Ian McLean (2009)

- Otters belong to the mustelid (weasel) family, which also includes stoats, weasels, mink and badgers
- Otters are the only truly amphibious members of the mustelid family, hunting in water & resting on land.
- There are 13 species of otter worldwide, they are found throughout the sub-polar regions, except in Australasia and Madagascar.
- Size range from the Asian short-clawed otter (51-74 cm, 5 kg) to the South American giant otter (141-188 cm, 30 kg). Eurasian otter mid-range (110-120 cm 8-10 kg). (Female >10%),
- Mustelids are usually long and thin, with short legs - an ideal shape for moving in confined spaces such as burrows. They have 5 toes on each foot (cats and dogs have 4).



Otter footprint in snow, Paul Madgett (2008). Note otters have 5 toes (dogs have 4)

- They have special anal glands which give their droppings characteristic smells - these are used for marking their territories.

## Otter Fact sheet

### Otter swimming



Otter swimming, Borrow Pit, Karen Woolley (2009)

- Otters are superbly adapted for swimming, with a long, sinuous, streamlined body, partially webbed feet and a muscular, rudder-like tail.
- The tail is 1/3 of their body length.
- They can swim at a speed of 6 miles per hour.
- In Scotland otters have been responsible for many 'Nessie' sightings - usually mothers and cubs swimming in a line, curving their bodies out of the water.

### Otter head



Otter, Andrew Taylor

- They have a flat head, with their eyes, ears and nostrils near the top
- This allows them to hear, see, smell and breathe without exposing their bodies.
- They can close their ears and nostrils when under water, and have stiff whiskers around their nose, which help them detect prey in murky water.
- They have very thick underfur (70,000 hairs per square centimetre) and long guard hairs. These trap air when the otters are under water – they do not have the thick layer of fat that seals have. They must have access to fresh water (even sea otters) so that they can keep their coats in good condition.

## Otter Fact sheet

### American mink



American mink, mammal society slide

- American mink - not a native, it was brought to Britain at the end of the 1920s to be bred for its fur.
- Cat sized, dark chocolate coloured. They have a thick bushy tail, which is cylindrical in shape and small eyes and ears. Since they were bred for their fur there are occasional light brown or even silver-blue coloured mink, but these do not usually survive.
- There is also a European mink, which looks almost identical - apart from a white upper lip - but that has not occurred in Britain since the last Ice Age. Although they look very similar they are not that closely related.

### Otter diet

- Otter's long thin shape means that they are not very energetically efficient – they lose heat very quickly, so have a very high metabolic rate.
- They need to eat 15% of their body weight per day, ~ 2 kg/day:
- Otters feed mainly on fish and eels, though they also take other animals.
- Eels are their favourite prey, because they are slow, then coarse fish (pike and chubb) then game fish (trout and salmon).
- They eat medium sized fish - 6 inches long & like fish farms, because they provide a nice source of big fish.
- They eat birds occasionally and amphibians - especially in the spring, when they are spawning. They will eat toads - they remove the skin, which is poisonous and eat the legs - there have been reports of mass toad kills by otters
- They also eat crustaceans - crabs in coastal areas, and crayfish.

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Typical otter spraint, Eleanor Knott

### Mink diet

- Mink eat more mammals & birds, and are less likely to eat fish. They are not that well adapted to hunting under water. They cannot see very well under water, so usually locate the fish from above, then dive down to catch them.

### Social

- Eurasian Otters are fairly solitary, though other species are more social
- Females have smaller ranges (20-40 km) than males (35-84 km).
- Male's territory usually overlaps with several female ranges.
- Otters don't have a specific breeding season – they can breed any time of the year.
- The females raise the cubs, they stay with their mother for 12 months, learning to fish etc.
- Otters will defend their territories aggressively, and cubs are in trouble if they get into a male's territory. Male otters have been found to have eaten cubs - this is a problem when orphaned otter cubs are being released into the wild - they must not be released into another otter's territory.

### Habitat quality – where otters frequent in Devon

- Moorland rivers - deciduous oak woodlands
- Small tributaries with good cover.
- Lowland backwaters with amphibians and eels.
- Urban areas
- Estuaries