

Wildlife in streams

All about otters

Otters are mammals and part of the Mustelid family which includes badgers, polecats, martens, weasels, stoats and mink. The otters in Great Britain are European otters which are about one metre long.

Otters have short legs, webbed feet and claws, long stream-lined body, small ears and a broad muzzle. They have two layers of fur - a thick waterproof outer one and a warm inner one. Only the outer layer gets wet when it swims. The otter's eyes are high on its head, and its nostrils are high on its nose so that it can see and smell when the rest of its body is below water.

Where do otters live?

Otters live mainly in rivers, but you can also find them in canals, marshes, small streams, ditches, ponds, lakes and coastal areas.

Otters generally live alone and have their own territory which they mark out with scent. They sleep in a holt which is a space under tree roots on the edge of a river.

Cubs

Female otters generally give birth to two cubs. The cubs are born blind and then open their eyes after a month. The young cubs play around the holt and take milk from their mother. At three months, they are ready for their first swimming lesson. Their mother nudges them out of the holt and teaches them to swim and to catch fish. When they are one year old, they leave their mother and mark out their own territories.

Footprints

In soft ground by rivers, you may spot otter footprints. You may see all five toes – but often you can only see four toes in the footprint. A dog's footprint has four toes.



Diet

Otters are carnivores and mainly eat fish. Clean rivers and streams are very important for otters and other wildlife. If the river becomes polluted, only the harmful bacteria can survive and the fish, plants and animals may die. If this happens, there may not be enough food for the otters to eat. Otters may also eat birds, small mammals, amphibians, crustaceans and molluscs. Their sensitive whiskers help them to detect prey. Otters have a very good sense of sight, smell and hearing.

How long do otters live?

Otters can live 8-12 years, but unfortunately they generally only live for about 4 years. Adult otters have few natural predators but their lives are often cut short by the damage and destruction caused to their habitat by humans. Young otter cubs may be killed by animals like mink.

What does an otter need to live a healthy life?

Otters need:

- unpolluted water with lots of fish to eat
- dense bankside cover to hide in
- undisturbed areas to make their holts

During the 1950s, otters in many parts of the country were nearly wiped out - all because of human activities. Chemical waste from industries polluted our rivers and killed the fish. This meant there were fewer fish for the otters to eat. The chemicals also affected the otter's ability to have cubs.

In the past, people often cleared the riverbanks destroying places where otters like to live. Since then, we have cleaned our rivers and made sure there are places suitable for otters to live. The good news is that the otter population has continually increased over the last 25 years and their range is expanding in England.



Factoid

Otters can swim at speeds of 12km/hr underwater.

They can travel for up to 400m before coming up for air – which is 16 lengths of a 25m swimming pool!

Find out more

The Dorset Wildlife Trust <https://www.dorsetwildlifetrust.org.uk/>