

NEWS RELEASE

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For immediate use

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Elusive Mammal Spotted on Nature Reserve

The County's leading wildlife conservation organisation has today had confirmation that one of Britain's most elusive mammals is making good use of one of its nature reserves in the Lee Valley. Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust (HMWT) received word from one of its volunteer wildlife recorders that he watched an otter swimming in the lake at Amwell Nature Reserve near Stanstead Abbots.

Away from coastal areas, otters are nocturnal and very difficult to spot, so until now the wildlife conservation organisation has relied mainly on sightings of footprints, food remains and spraints - the territorial markings otters leave on rocks and tree roots. Although HMWT has also had a number of other fleeting sightings from anglers and early morning dog walkers, it has often not been possible to positively confirm the animals.

Otters were extinct in Hertfordshire by the 1970s but three individuals were released at Amwell Quarry (now Amwell Nature reserve) by the Otters Trust in 1991 as part of a conservation project. The last full survey of otters in the County was in 2004 and it showed that between six and nine individuals living in the area. This could have increased by a small amount in the meantime.

The Trust is leading the County, alongside other conservation partners, to conserve and encourage otters in line with the Herts Biodiversity Action Plan.

Tim Hill, Conservation Manager for HMWT said "The sighting is fantastic news- it confirms that Amwell Nature Reserve, and the works that we have done there, is providing just the right habitat for this wonderful, yet shy creature. A male otter's territory may be up to 25 miles of river valley, so we cannot expect to have a large population of them in Hertfordshire - you really do have to be lucky to see one!"

He continued "We know that Amwell NR and our other nature reserves in this upper stretch of the Lee Valley, offers quiet, undisturbed places for them to rest and breed, the right food and good quality river habitat. Whilst you have to be up very early (or late!) to catch a glimpse of one of these wonderful mammals, Amwell really is the best place for you to have a chance of seeing one. With continued hard work with landowners, environmental agencies, partners and the help of our volunteers, we want to make it possible for more people to see more otters in the years to come."



Herts & Middlesex

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President - SA Bowes-Lyon, PCA

Barry Reed is a Volunteer and Wildlife Recorder for Amwell Nature Reserve and spotted the otter. A regular visitor to Amwell, he is well known locally for his bird sightings.

He said “I watched the otter for a couple of minutes - it came right out of the water and was wandering around the two dry pools immediately in front of the hide, it then got in the water and swam up the channel and seemed to go ashore on the heronry island.”

He continued “In over 30 years of visiting this reserve I had only heard the tales of otter sightings and hoped that I might one day be lucky enough to glimpse one. I’m absolutely delighted to have had such a great view of one- not only in Hertfordshire, but at my favourite nature reserve!”

ENDS

Notes for Editors

- 1. Herts & Middlesex Wildlife Trust is a charity dedicated to protecting wildlife for future generations. It safeguards and manages 43 Nature Reserves across the two counties, advises on wider countryside issues and is at the forefront of developing long-term nature conservation strategies. It has over 21,000 members and is one of 47 local Wildlife Trusts across the UK.*
- 2. Amwell Nature Reserve is a former gravel pit in the Lee Valley near Ware/Stanstead Abbots (TL 377129) It supports internationally important numbers of wintering wildfowl, along with outstanding communities of breeding birds and of dragonflies and damselflies. The site includes Great Hardmead Lake and Holycross Lake, which were excavated between 1973 and 1990 by Cemex (previously RMC Aggregates), and a variety of associated wetland, grassland and woodland habitats. The Reserve is of international importance for wintering gadwall and shoveler ducks. The site also regularly attracts wintering bitterns - this is one of the best places to see this elusive bird. During mid-winter smew can usually be seen.
Thanks to significant funding from East of England Development Agency and Growth Area Funding (Green Arc) in 2008, the reserve now contains 3 hides, several viewpoints and a seasonal Dragonfly Trail with a boardwalk, which enables you to view dragonflies close up hunting over open water*

3. Key Points from The Hertfordshire Biodiversity Action Plan- 50 year vision Objectives for Otters

- To maintain the existing released Otters in order to achieve a viable population in Hertfordshire within 10years.
- To achieve a regular presence of Otters throughout Hertfordshire river catchments by 2010.
- To enhance river habitat quality through a programme of river enhancement schemes with at least three schemes completed annually for the next 10 years

Proposed action

- Ensure all wetland Wildlife Sites regularly used by Otters are recognised and protected through Local Plans and endeavour to strengthen river corridor policies where appropriate.
- Include action for Otters in all Local Plans covering Hertfordshire and include specific river enhancement projects
- All riparian nature reserves and country parks to consider the requirements of Otters within the management plan by 2000 and subsequently to implement actions if appropriate.
- A list of key river corridor sites forming a refuge network for Otters in Hertfordshire should be drawn up with secure and appropriate management of these sites over 10 years.
- To consider the merits of a further release of captive bred Otters (to agreed national framework) to boost the survival chances of existing animals.
- Attempt to reduce accidental deaths by identifying key sites for the provision of road underpasses or similar.
- All conservation advisers operating within the county to be aware of the requirements of Otters and the aims of this plan, and to promote this when in contact with riparian landowners.
- Contribute to national Otter surveys, as appropriate.
- Collate information on prey productivity, biomass and pollutant levels. Report as appropriate.
- Continue studies on the diet of the released Otters in the county.
- Organise at least one meeting annually with all interested local parties to discuss progress and agree future actions.
- Use this popular species to publicise the importance of water quality and riparian habitats to biodiversity, through events, press releases and articles.

For the full version of the Hertfordshire Biodiversity Action Plan, see Hertfordshire Environmental Forum website: www.hef.org.uk

*For further information, or for a Jpeg of the photograph(s) shown, please contact: **Clare Gray, Marketing & PR Officer, Herts & Middlesex Wildlife Trust on tel. 01727 858901 or clare.gray@hmwt.org***

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Herts &
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Otter on bank. Credit: Darrin Smith



Amwell Nature Reserve - from viewpoint towards White hide.