

# The Otter

## (*Lutra lutra*)

*Habitat, Population and Legal status*

Herts &  
Middlesex



Photo: Darrin Smith

### Recognition:

Brown fur, often pale on underside; long slender body; small ears; long thick tail; webbed feet.

Head/body: 60-120cm; tail: 40-45cm; weight: 7-10kg.

## Habitat Preferences:

The European Otter is an opportunist both in terms of diet and habitat, and forages in coastal and freshwater environments. It has a high metabolic rate and needs to consume about 10% of its body weight each day. To meet these energy demands, otters require a large territory in which to forage, typically a 16-20km stretch of river.

Otters have a preference for rivers and lakes with clean transparent water, a high flow rate and well-vegetated steep banks. Typical vegetation includes mature trees and woodland, particularly deciduous species, willow and alder carr; scrub and tall bankside vegetation such as hawthorn, blackthorn, bramble, and dog rose; willowherb and reed and sedge beds (Bytchkov & Chanin 1994). The roots of mature trees, particularly ash, oak and sycamore, provide potential holt sites and reed/sedge beds are used to make 'couches'. Important feeding grounds are associated with gravel bottoms and narrow streams or tributaries since these features are optimal for fish. Permanent, well-vegetated mid-channel islands provide secure lying-up and breeding sites. Additionally, ditches and ponds provide alternative food supplies such as amphibians, especially during the winter months and when rivers are in flood.

## Population Declines

Otter populations in the UK suffered a dramatic decline in the 1950's. Populations in Hertfordshire became extinct in the late 1970's, with the River Mimram reputed to have supported the last breeding female otter in Hertfordshire, at Tewinbury in 1978. The cause of this national decline was direct persecution, the accelerated loss and fragmentation of suitable riparian habitats, due to agricultural intensification and heavy urbanisation, and the contamination of wetland systems with organochlorine pesticides.

In 1991, two groups of captive bred otters were released into Hertfordshire by The Otter Trust. One group was released on the River Lea, the second on the River Stort. Both release groups consisted of two sisters and a male otter. After an initial movement upstream, both groups moved downstream and converged at the confluence of these rivers at Rye Meads (TL387106). It was hoped that they would eventually re-colonise other rivers in Hertfordshire.

## Legal Protection

The European Otter has received full legal protection in England and Wales since 1978. It is included in Schedule 5 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, making it an offence to kill, injure or take a wild otter without a licence; to intentionally damage, destroy or obstruct a holt; or to disturb an otter in its resting place. Furthermore the species has European protection under the Habitats Directive 43/93; being listed in Annex 2a and 4a, the Bern Convention, in Appendix III, and world-wide protection under CITES.