

The Otter (*Lutra lutra*)

Identification, habitat and signs

Herts &
Middlesex



Recognition

Body, brown fur (often paler on the underside). Total length: 1 - 1.3m, weight male 10.1kg average, female 7.0kg average. Swim low in the water with only eyes and nose and ears above the surface leaving a U-shaped wake.

Spraints

Faeces, known as spraints (Fig. 1), are deposited in prominent places along rivers or streams in an otter's range, such as on fallen tree trunks, tree roots, boulders or ledges under bridges. Spraints might also be found at several places along a well-used otter path and at the entrance to **holts** or resting places. Where there are no prominent features the otter might make a sign heap out of mud, sand or twists of grass and leave a spraint on top of it. When regular sprainting occurs on grass, tufts are often greener and taller than surrounding grass.



Figure 1. Fresh otter spraint

Fresh spraints can be easily identified by their sweet musky odour. They are often greenish black and covered with mucus when fresh and usually contain fish bones and scales since small fish are otters' primary food source. However fur, feathers and invertebrate remains may also be found when a spraint is dissected. Dried out spraints crumble and lose their colour so that they appear like grey ash. Size and shape are variable, from compact cylinder shape spraint up to 6cm long to a small piece or tarry smear.



Tracks

5 toes on each foot. Front footprint almost circular, 6.5 - 7cm long and 6cm wide. Back footprint is generally longer, between 6 and 9cm (Fig. 3). Length of stride: 70-80cm

Tail drag marks may sometimes be seen in soft mud.

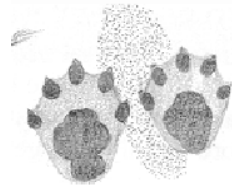


Figure 3. Otter foot prints (from left: hind foot, fore foot)

Runs

Runs in vegetation from burrow leading to water, occasional mud slides for play and quick access to water on steep banks.

Habitat (inland otters)

Prefer clean rivers with abundant and varied food supply and bank-side vegetation offering secluded sites for holts.