

FACTS About Otters in UK Rivers

Life on land and water

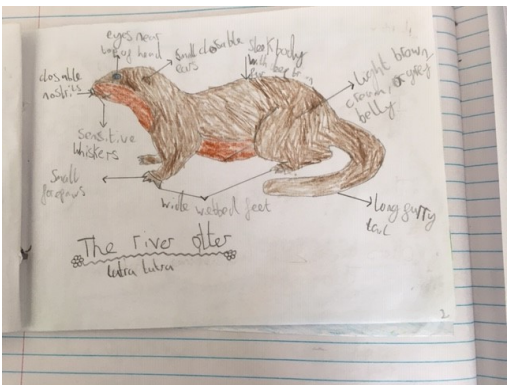
• Otters have an acute sense of smell, hearing and eyesight. Their eyes are placed at the top of their head so it can remain alert whilst under water.

• They communicate by whistling, chirping noises and spitting sounds.

• They have webbed feet for swimming and dense fur for warmth and can close their ears and nose under water.

• Otters are mainly active at night time.

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The life cycle of a river otter

- Otters live up to 8-9 years in the wild but they can live up to 20 years in zoos!
- It is a member of the Mustelid family. It is the only true semi-aquatic member of the weasel family.
- The average otter is 1-1.3 metres long and weighs up to 9 kg.
- Otters breed at any time of the year, mainly in spring. Their gestation period is 9 weeks.

- They usually have 2-3 cubs weighing no more than 100g. They are not born until summer.
- Otter cubs have a death rate of 32% in their first year and 54% in their second year.
- Females give birth in old abandoned burrows from other otters.

Where otters live?

- Otters seek down rivers filled with food and oxygen banks where they can raise their cubs.
- Their favourite habitats are wetlands, rivers and coastal areas.
- Most otters live in dens built by other animals. They live in holes called holt.
- A Holt is an underground chamber with lots of different entrances to protect against flooding with at least one entrance above water level.

What do otters eat?

• Otters mainly eat fish (60-90% of their diet). They can eat up to 2-3 lbs of fish per day! They eat fish such as carp, sticklebacks and eels. During the spring they eat amphibians which form a large part of their diet. Occasionally otters will take small mammals and water birds such as coots, moor hens and ducks! Otters are at the top of freshwater food chain.

Conservation status

• Otters are strictly protected by the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981) and cannot be killed or sold. In the late 1950s and early 1960s otters underwent a sudden and catastrophic decline throughout much of Britain. The cause was probably the combined effects of pollution and habitat destruction particularly by the drainage of wet areas. While otters are completely disappeared from the rivers of most of central and southern England in just 50 years their future now looks much brighter.

Where to find an otter:

- Under and over bridges or bank sides
- on bankiers and rafts either in or near a river
- on old tree stumps or logs
- At either end of short cut paths
- on gravel banks or sand and muddy areas
- around pond and lakes
- In marshes or reed beds
- At river junctions or interconnections

