



UPDATED PLAN DECEMBER 2021

OTTER *Lutra lutra*

1. INTRODUCTION

The European (Eurasian) Otter (*Lutra lutra*) is the only species of wild otter native to the UK. It occurs predominantly in rivers, but can be found in streams, lakes, ponds, reedbeds, wetlands and coastal waters. As a large carnivore, it feeds almost exclusively on fish, particularly eels, but crayfish, amphibians, birds and small mammals will also occasionally be taken.



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Often the only indications of the presence of this rare and elusive creature are its 'spraints' (droppings). These spraints are used to mark their territories, which can extend to as much as 40km. Otters live in 'holts'; these resting sites may include the tree roots of large riverside trees, dense bankside vegetation and reed beds. An individual otter can have up to 30 of these resting sites, only the most secure of which will be used as a breeding den.

With an average life span of an adult otter of just four years and for females in this time the production of an average of two litters, each with an average of two cubs, the level of recruitment is low (Kruuk, 2006).

Otters are indicators of a healthy river system, where the water is relatively unpolluted, with good fish stocks and bankside vegetation. By protecting otters we naturally safeguard the habitats they rely on, including rivers, reedbeds and ponds, and thus in turn protect other species which are dependent on these wetlands.

2.	OBJECTIVES	TARGETS
Associated Action Plans are: 'Old Parkland & Veteran Trees', 'The Built Environment', 'Ponds', 'Rivers & Streams', 'Marsh & Swamp', 'Reed beds', 'Lakes & Reservoirs' and 'White-clawed Crayfish'		
PLEASE CONSULT THE '<i>GENERIC SPECIES</i>' ACTION PLAN IN CONJUNCTION WITH THIS DOCUMENT FOR OBJECTIVES COMMON TO ALL SPECIES PLANS		
A.	To increase the size of the population in the county through natural re-colonisation and breeding.	ongoing
B.	To increase the range of otters in the county to achieve the National target of 85% occupancy of 10km squares.	2030

3. NATIONAL BAP OBJECTIVES & TARGETS

The otter is on the current UK Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) Priority Species list published in 2007 ([Joint Nature Conservation Committee](#)). The targets and objectives for the [Otter BAP](#), updated in 2010, may be seen online.

4. CURRENT STATUS

Formerly widespread throughout the UK, the otter suffered a major decline in numbers from the 1950s to the 1970s, and was lost from much of lowland England, including their sub-region. Further to the introduction of legal protection, bans on toxic [organochloride pesticides](#), and positive habitat enhancements, the decline now appears to have reversed and the species is re-colonising former haunts. However, in view of the high adult and juvenile mortality, low breeding success and low genetic diversity and distribution, the population is still fragile (Beaton, 2013). Since 2013 Cardiff University has been conducting post mortems on otter casualties and found that the the main cause of mortality is road traffic accidents, followed by emaciation (Yoxon, 2016).

Surveys indicate a trend in otter re-colonisation through both the Severn and Trent catchments. In Warwickshire, signs of otter activity have been recorded throughout the county, including small stream and canals. The population is breeding at a number of locations in the county but the actual population size is difficult to assess due to the large range and elusiveness of the animal (P.Sanders, *pers.comm.* 2019).

4.1 Legal and Policy Status

A wide range of species and habitats are protected under international and domestic laws, including the [Wild Birds Directive](#) (1979), the [Wildlife and Countryside Act](#) (1981), the [Conservation Regulations](#) (1994) and [EC Habitats Directive](#) (1992). Protection of sites is afforded nationally through [Sites of Special Scientific Interest](#) (SSSI) designation, [Special Areas of Conservation](#) (SAC) and [Local Nature Reserve](#) (LNR) statutory status. Other sites are offered recognition of their value through Local Wildlife Site status (LWS), Local Character Areas and identified Landscape Scale Areas. The [National Planning Policy Framework](#) (2012) chapter/section 11 states conditions with regard to any development negatively affecting biodiversity, including protected sites, ancient woodland and other irreplaceable habitats (paragraph 118). The Wildlife & Countryside Act and schedule 2 of the [Conservation of Habitats & Species Regulations](#) (as amendment, 2019, EU exit) make it an offence to intentionally kill, injure, take, possess, sell, buy or transport a range of species.

The otter is currently listed on Annexes II and V of the Habitats Directive, Appendix II of [Bern Convention](#) and Appendix I of [CITES](#). It receives full protection under Schedule 5 of the Wildlife & Countryside Act and schedule 2 of the Conservation of Habitats & Species Regulations, making it an offence to intentionally kill, injure, take, possess, sell, buy or transport any otter (dead or alive), to damage, destroy or obstruct access to any structure or place used by otters, or to disturb otters whilst they are occupying such a structure or place. The European sub-species is also listed as globally threatened on the [IUCN Red Data List](#). The [Water Framework Directive 2006](#) is a piece of European legislation which promotes a new approach to water management through river basin planning.

4.2 Current Factors Affecting the Species

- **Degradation of bankside habitat features** – through intensification of agriculture, river engineering and development. Many stretches of river lack the dense emergent vegetation, scrub and trees that otters require as holts to be

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used for resting and breeding. Opportunities to reverse this trend include fencing lengths of river bank, planting trees and shrubs, and re-establishing other riparian features.

- **Lack and continued loss of extensive wetlands**, such as reedbeds, wet grassland and wet woodland (particularly required for breeding), through development and intensive land management.
- **Poor water quality** and continued pollution (both direct and diffuse) of some watercourses.
- **Declining eel populations**, an important food source for the otter.
- **Inappropriate water management** (e.g. over-abstraction).
- **Non-natural mortalities**, particularly on roads, as otters move between watercourses, as the rapid rise in road kill in 2012 indicates.
- **Disturbance through recreation** and other bankside / water-based activities.
- **Increase in anti-otter lobbying** by some angling interests.

5. LOCAL ACTION

- Much of the work for otters in Warwickshire is undertaken through [Warwickshire Wildlife Trust](#) (WWT). With otter numbers and range now much increased, it is no longer necessary to carry out annual surveys and install holts, but in the past this work has included:
 - Undertaking catchment based distribution surveys of as much of Warwickshire's waterways as possible, including a one-day county wide survey checking identified sites for fresh spraint to assess population numbers. Data is reported to WWT, [Warwickshire Mammal Group](#) and [Warwickshire Biological Records Centre](#) (WBRC)
 - Providing advice to land owners and managers.
 - Undertaking practical habitat restoration and creation projects, including the construction of artificial otter holts throughout the county.
 - Advising on mitigation related to developments.
 - Providing training and support to a volunteer network.
 - Raising awareness of otter related issues through appropriate publicity.
- WWT, in partnership with [Coventry City Council](#) (CCC), won a Biffa Award in 2018 to create new wildlife habitats at Lake View Park, an important wildlife site of 27ha in Coventry, including the improvement of the banks of the R. Sherbourne for otters; the presence of people and dogs does not seem to deter otters as spraint was found here in 2019.
- The [Environment Agency](#) promotes a wide range of enhancements, relating not only to habitat, but also water quality, fisheries etc.
- The administration of [agri-environment schemes](#) administered by Natural England has improved the management of riparian / wetland habitats.
- Partnerships such as the [Tame Valley Wetlands Partnership](#) and Wetlands West (formerly Severn & Avon Vales Wetlands Partnership) promote the

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conservation of otters through improving public awareness and water quality, and delivering habitat creation projects.

- 18ha of reed bed improvement and 24ha of reed bed expansion has taken place at 20 sites, including [Brandon Marsh](#) (WWT), [Middleton Lakes](#) (RSPB), [Coombe Country Park](#) (CCC) and [Kingsbury Water Park](#) (WCC) (see the [Reed beds](#) Action plan).
- Other organisations, such as the [Canal and River Trust](#) and some Local Authorities, promote otters through appropriate working practices.

6. PROPOSED LOCAL ACTIONS

ACTION	Lead	Partners	By
PLEASE CONSULT THE 'GENERIC SPECIES' ACTION PLAN IN CONJUNCTION WITH THIS DOCUMENT FOR ACTIONS COMMON TO ALL SPECIES PLANS			
Site / Species Safeguard & Management			
SM1. Undertake practical habitat management to benefit otters, including creation of at least 5km of buffer strips, which give lying up areas and natural holts, at least 6-12m wide.	WWT	EA SRT OTF NE TRT LOs	ongoing
SM2. Continue to raise awareness of non-natural otter mortalities. Implement appropriate mitigation measures (e.g. underpasses on new and existing roads and fencing at known mortality hotspots) to reduce impacts.	WWT	EA LAs WCC	ongoing
SM3. Consider the habitat requirements of otters in the management agreements of agri-environment schemes in the vicinity of water courses.	NE	EA SRT TRT	ongoing
Advisory			
A1. Provide advice to key groups including landowners, fishery managers and local authorities with respect to best practice management for the benefit of otters.	WWT	EA SRT TRT	ongoing
Research & Monitoring			
RM1. Monitor otter distribution on a 10km square basis to attempt to match the National target of 85% occupancy.	WWT	EA OTF CRT	2030
RM2. Monitor the effectiveness and success of habitat enhancements and mitigation works.	WWT	FC SRT CRT EA TRT	ongoing

ACTION	Lead	Partners	By
		LAs LOs	
RM3. Monitor the state of other factors likely to impact on the otter population (e.g. water quality, fish stocks).	EA	SRT TRT LAs	ongoing
RM4. Identify areas for river and wetland habitat restoration and creation for the benefit of otters.	WWT	EA NE FC CRT SRT TRT LOs	ongoing
RM5. Collect otter corpses, sending them for post mortem and tissue analysis to the Cardiff University Otter Project .	WWT	EA LAs	ongoing
RM6. Identify sites of repeated road kills to direct the installation of under-road pipes.	WWT	WCC	ongoing
Communication, Education & Publicity			
CP1. Using the species as a 'flagship', publicise the importance of water quality and riparian / wetland habitat for the otter and biodiversity in general.	WWT	EA NE FC SRT TRT CRT LOs	ongoing

Abbreviations: CRT – Canal & River Trust, EA - Environment Agency, FC – Forestry Commission, LAs – Local Authorities, LOs – Landowners, NE – Natural England, OTF - Otter Task Force, SRT – Severn River Trust, TRT – Trent Rivers Trust, WWT – Warwickshire Wildlife Trust.

7. PROGRESS WITH ACTIONS

From 2015–2020 there will be a rolling programme of reporting on progress, of 10 action plans per year with an annual summary of results. Progress with this plan up to 2019 can be seen at <https://www.warwickshirewildlifetrust.org.uk/LBAP>.

8. BIBLIOGRAPHY

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RSPB (2016) [State of Nature](#)– a stocktake of all our native wildlife by over 50 wildlife organisations.

Natural England (2016) [Conservation Strategy for the 21st Century](#). Sets out how NE will help deliver DEFRA's ambitions for the environment to reverse biodiversity loss, sustain distinctive landscapes and enhance engagement with nature.

Worldwide Fund for Nature (2018) [The Living Planet Report](#): aiming higher. Published in collaboration with the Zoological Society of London.

9. FURTHER INFORMATION

[Mammal Society](#) - otter fact sheet available online.

Canal and River Trust – a charitable trust set up to look after England and Wales' waterways in 2012.

Natural England & Defra (2019) - [Otters: surveys and mitigation for development projects](#)

10. CONTACT

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