

# Otter

## Our objective for this species is:

Stable, resident (breeding) otter populations present at carrying capacity throughout all rivers and tributaries in Harrogate district by 2018.



## Introduction

The otter is known as a flagship species that reflects the health of our rivers and wetlands. It preys chiefly upon fish and is at the top of its food chain. Semi-aquatic and terrestrial habitats, particularly woodland are also important for it.

Formerly widespread throughout the UK, the otter underwent a rapid decline from the 1950s to 1970s, leaving only fragmented populations. It became absent from most of England until very recently. Recovery has been in response to three main factors; the ban on organochlorine pesticides that caused its near extinction, legal protection (in force from 1978) and significant improvements in river water quality (some industrialised rivers were fishless in the 1970s).

The recovery of the otter is one of the major conservation success stories of the last 30 years. It has demonstrated the benefits of long-term monitoring and the use of an iconic species to raise awareness of problems of pollution and the wider benefits of action to improve the environment. However, the vulnerability of the otter to pollution and to poor water quality (directly or through low fish stocks) leaves no room for complacency.

The otter is a key target species in the national BAP, with the Environment Agency (EA) and The Wildlife Trusts as joint lead partners. The Yorkshire Wildlife Trust (YWT) plays a major part in delivering the national BAP at regional level.

## National status

Formerly widespread throughout the UK, the otter underwent a rapid decline from the 1950s to 1970s; leaving only fragmented populations, it became absent from most of England. The fifth national survey was completed in 2010 and 58.8 per cent of sites surveyed were positive, compared with only 5.8 per cent in 1979. Otters have now returned across England, except in parts of the southeast. Natural re-colonisation is considered to have occurred, with the expansion of populations from Scotland, Wales, and north and west England, so that formerly isolated regional outposts have now become effectively linked. The recovery has been assisted in some parts by re-introductions, however these are no longer considered necessary in the light of national survey results indicating the success of natural recovery (the 2010 survey is available at <http://publications.environment-agency.gov.uk/PDF/GEHO1010BTDJ-E-E.pdf>).

## Regional status

Historically, otters were found throughout Yorkshire but, by the 1980s, were lost from most of the county, although a remnant presence survived in parts of North and perhaps East

Yorkshire. The Rivers Derwent and Esk on the North Yorkshire moors were the subject of a successful otter release programme in the early 1990s. It is possible that these breeding populations expanded to augment neighbouring catchments in the region. However, it is considered more likely that natural local recovery plus re-colonisation originating from strong populations in places like Northumbria played a greater role in the recovery of otters in the region.

The 2010 national survey notes that the Yorkshire region has shown a major increase in both positive sites and otter distribution since the 2000-2 survey. However, it cautions that although there has been a considerable consolidation in those areas like the Swale, Ure and Ouse which previously had a sparse population together with expansion into those areas which did not previously have otters, the results indicate that this spread has been relatively recent in many areas and there is still a small otter population spread over a wide area. There are some catchments in South Yorkshire with few, if any, otters.

## Local status

Otters were largely lost to the district in the 70s and 80s, although a small population clung on along the Ure, upstream of Ripon. Recent recovery has been impressive. The 2010 national survey says of the catchments of the rivers Swale, Ure, Ouse, Nidd and Wharfe, "there has been a major expansion of otter range within this area. The small number of negative sites is largely confined to minor headwaters." Within these catchments numbers of positive sites (out of a total of 154 sample sites) has risen from just 4 in 1979 to 113 in 2009/10.

Survey years	1977-9	1984-6	1991-4	2000-2	2009-10
Positive sites	4	4	13	31	113

Otters are now present again throughout most of the district, although across much of it densities have probably not yet recovered to pre-decline levels. The watercourses in the district represent important corridors for otter dispersal east-west and north-south.

## Legal status

The otter is a European Protected Species which receives a high level of protection under the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations, 2010 and the Wildlife and Countryside Act. Under this legislation it is an offence to intentionally or recklessly kill, injure, take or sell otters or to damage, destroy or obstruct access to their resting places. It is classified by the International Union for Conservation of Nature as 'vulnerable' due to the declining or endangered status of many of its populations.

## Requirements

The linear nature of the rivers and streams used by otters and the limiting factor of food availability within these habitats means that otters can have very large home ranges. A male otter may use up to 40km of watercourse, including main river, becks, ditches along with ponds, lakes, riverside woodland and wetlands. This use of a wide geographical area and habitat type range means that a catchment-wide approach is essential to otter conservation.

Otters' main requirements are:

- Plentiful food supply: species taken depends on season and abundance. Prey is primarily fish - often minor species (e.g. bullheads) and coarse fish, also salmonids; amphibians and crustaceans including crayfish may be important; small mammals and birds occasionally taken.
- Good water quality, sufficient to support adequate food supply, and without pollutants which may accumulate in tissues and impact on breeding and/or life expectancy.
- Secure undisturbed breeding sites with associated food resource are essential if otters are to establish and maintain sustainable populations.
- Secure undisturbed lying-up/resting sites. Otters are largely nocturnal and use a variety of sites to lie up during the day. These are spaces at approximately one kilometre intervals along a watercourse.
- Freedom from accidental mortality especially road deaths.

## Threats

- Pollution still occurs, impacting both directly on otters and indirectly on food supply.
- Lack of fish biomass, which may be affected by reduced water quality, poor in-channel and bank habitats, and maintenance and flow regimes which may be affected by land drainage.
- Degradation of bank side habitat.
- Accidental death on roads has been identified nationally as the most rapidly growing cause of otter mortality, as numbers have recovered. Anecdotal evidence is that this applies equally to Harrogate district.
- Accidental death in fish, crayfish and mink traps (otter guards and maximum dimensions apply to legal traps).
- Development affecting rivers and bank side habitat and habitat connectivity.
- Access and recreational disturbance, particularly an issue for breeding sites but also affecting watercourses where bank side habitat is poor and human activity high.
- Otter predation at fish farms and fishing lakes. There may be a conflict of interests where fish-farm management fails to take recommended precautionary measures.
- Persecution.

## Current action

- YWT and the EA play the major part in delivering the national BAP at regional level.
- YWT advise on and carry out habitat enhancement and on wider otter, river and wetland related issues. They undertake and co-ordinate otter and habitat surveys.
- YWT implement a number of area-based projects (none of which currently operate in our district, although the former Yorkshire Otters and Rivers Project was very involved in Harrogate district during the most critical phase for recovery in our catchments).
- Collation of otter records by North and East Yorkshire Ecological Data Centre and the EA.
- National surveys are undertaken every seven years, the last one carried out by the EA.
- Research into mortalities, funded by the EA nationally. (If you find a dead otter, please contact the EA by email at [enquiries@environment-agency.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@environment-agency.gov.uk) or by phone on 0370 8506506 stating exactly when and where you found it.)
- Highways Agency has produced otter guidelines for road developments.

## Opportunities

- Achievement of 'Good Ecological Status' for water bodies, in accordance with the Water Framework Directive via the Humber River Basin Management Plan ([www.environment-agency.gov.uk/research/planning/124803.aspx](http://www.environment-agency.gov.uk/research/planning/124803.aspx))
- Conservation options are available under the Environmental Stewardship Schemes (ESS).
- Good agricultural practice cross-compliance measures include provision of buffers to water courses.
- Habitat enhancement opportunities as part of flood alleviation schemes, woodland management etc.
- Protection of specimen fisheries (e.g. through otter fencing). See the Otters and Stillwater Fisheries Guide published by the Wildlife Trusts and the EA (available on their websites).
- Installation of otter ledges into new and refurbished bridges to reduce road casualties.

### LINKS WITH OTHER HDBAP PLANS:

<b>Flowing water HAP</b>	<b>Reedbed HAP</b>
<b>Standing water HAP</b>	<b>Fen HAP</b>
<b>Woodland HAP</b>	<b>Water vole SAP</b>

## The UK BAP Objectives are:

- Maintain and expand existing populations.
- By 2018 restore breeding otters to all catchments and coastal areas where they have been recorded since 1960.