



Bedfordshire and Luton Species Action Plan: European Otter

Last updated September 2009

European otter
Lutra lutra

National lead organisation(s):
Environment Agency, Wildlife Trusts

County lead organisation(s):
Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity
Wildlife Trust for Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire,
Northamptonshire and Peterborough

The European otter is the only native species of otter occurring in the UK. It is one of our largest carnivores and an important indicator of the health of riparian habitats. This semi-aquatic mammal can be found in rivers, streams, lakes, ponds, reedbeds and suitable coastal waters. It thrives where well developed bankside habitat provides cover for breeding and resting during the day. The diet consists mainly of fish but otters will also feed on crayfish, amphibians, mammals and waterfowl.

Current status

National status

The European otter has been identified as a national priority species for conservation action (UK BAP Review 2007). The UK population is of international significance. At the beginning of the 20th century otter numbers were thought to be low because of persecution but their distribution was widespread. Between the 1950s and 1970s and throughout much of the UK the otter population underwent a rapid decline in numbers, partly due to use of organochlorine pesticides dieldrin and aldrin.

By the 1980s European otters were lost from the midlands and south east. Some survived in Wales, south west England and Scotland, where sea loch and coastal colonies comprise one of the largest populations in Europe. A significant population also exists in Northern Ireland.

National otter surveys were carried out by the Vincent Wildlife Trust in 1977-79, 1984-86, 1991-94 and by the Environment Agency in 2000-02. In the baseline survey of 1977-79, positive signs of otters were found at just over 5% of the sites surveyed; between 1984-86 just under 9% of sites surveyed showed positive; between 1991-94 22% of sites were positive and between 2000-02 34% of sites were positive for otter.

The results from the national surveys show that the species is continuing to recover and is present in all eight Environment Agency regions. Population expansion and re-colonisation is occurring through breeding and movement, in general from west to east and from north to south. This recovery population continues to expand and appears to be creating large areas



with at first few otters. The population then consolidates, which seems to occur some years afterwards.

Local status

The European otter was widespread in Bedfordshire in the early part of the 20th century (J Green 1983). Numbers declined during the 1950s and 1960s and by 1979 after a survey by the Wildlife Trust and Bedfordshire Natural History Society, otters were thought to be extinct in the county.

The first proven evidence of otter reappearance in Bedfordshire occurred in 1986 when spraint was found on the River Ivel under New Road Bridge, Sandy. From September 1986 until September 1990 otter presence was recorded on the Ivel on a fairly regular basis (J Green unpublished). A countywide survey on behalf of the Bedfordshire Wildlife Trust was carried out in 1992/93. Sixty-six sites were checked either by a full survey or a random check. Poor weather conditions combined with high water levels may have washed away some signs and there was only one positive site found on the county boundary with Hertfordshire.

In spring 1995 four otters (two males and two females) were released onto the River Great Ouse upstream of Bedford as part of the Otter Trust reintroduction programme licensed by English Nature.

The third otter survey of Bedfordshire took place in 1996/7. The 66 sites were checked for signs of otters. Eighteen of the sites (27%) showed positive evidence of otters, 15 of these were on the Ouse.

A second release took place in 1998 when six otters (two males and four females) were released on the River Ivel near Blunham, also part of the Otter Trust reintroduction programme licensed by English Nature.

The fourth county survey in 2003/4 found otter signs at 26 of the standard 63 survey sites (41.3%). Otters were now present along the whole of the Ouse in Bedfordshire as well as its tributaries the Ivel, Elstow Brook and Rhee, and on the River Flit. Despite extensive survey work no signs could be found on the rivers Ouzel or Lea.

A group of otter monitors were trained in otter survey/monitoring in 2004 and have continued to monitor sites across the county on a monthly basis, providing an up to date record of otter distribution across the county.

Current factors affecting the European otter

- Pollution from a wide range of substances including PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls) and heavy metals, e.g., lead, cadmium and mercury. Full impacts of these effects are unclear due to the complex way in which they interact in the aquatic environment
- Low rainfall and water abstraction, which can concentrate pollutants and reduce food availability
- Loss and lack of wetland habitats associated with rivers, leading to the loss of resting and breeding sites. Development pressures, wetland drainage, intensified riparian management, agricultural cultivation along riverbanks, river engineering and flood prevention measures are all contributing factors



- Loss of suitable resting and breeding sites due to lack of appropriate management of riverside pollards
- Disturbance from people, dogs and livestock and water based recreation activities such as angling and boating
- Accidental death: road and rail casualties, drowning in fyke nets used for eels and drowning in crayfish traps not equipped with appropriate otter guards
- Poor habitat and water quality in some areas, which reduces the sustainability of fish stocks

Current action

Legal

The Otter is protected under:

- Annexes II and IV of the EC Habitats Directive
- Schedule 2 of the Conservation (Natural Habitats &c.) Regulations 1994
- Schedule 5 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended)
- Appendix 2 of the BERN Convention (Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats)
- Appendix 1 of CITES (Convention of International Trade in Endangered Species)

The Act and Regulations make it an offence to:

- i) Deliberately capture, injure or kill an otter
- ii) Intentionally or recklessly disturb an otter in its holt, or obstruct access to a holt
- iii) Damage or destroy an otter holt
- iv) Possess or transport an otter or any part of any otter
- v) Sell (or offer for sale) or exchange an otter

In addition, Planning Policy Statement 9 Nature Conservation (PPS9) August 2005 emphasises the importance of retaining and managing natural features linking wildlife sites. This can be utilised to retain links between otter habitats in areas where populations are known to exist but have no protection as nature reserves or SSSIs.

Management, research and guidance

The Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) produced a Framework for Otter Conservation 1995-2000 a national initiative to improve otter habitats and populations.

The Vincent Wildlife Trust has carried out national otter surveys between 1977-79, 1984-86 and 1991-94 and by the Environment Agency in 2000-2002.



Agri-environment schemes administered by Natural England can help to improve the management of waterside habitat benefiting the otter.

Management advice for and information on otters can be sought from Natural England, The Wildlife Trust and Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity. The Bedfordshire Otters and Rivers Project 2005-2008 aids and provides support for habitat conservation and enhancement schemes including the construction of artificial holts (a resting or breeding site of an otter) at suitable sites. The Bedfordshire Otters and Rivers Project and Wildlife Trust protect otter habitat and provide advice and raise awareness of the general public and landowners by organising training days, talks and other events. Advice on otters and still water fisheries is available from the Bedfordshire Otters and Rivers Project. The Bedfordshire Recording and Monitoring Centre, Wildlife Trust, Otters and Rivers Project and Bedfordshire Natural History Society keep records of otters in the county including any signs, sightings and casualties.

The Environment Agency takes account of the requirements of the otter in its routine riverside capital and maintenance works.

Action plan objectives and targets

Objective

Maintain and expand the range and population of the European otter in Bedfordshire

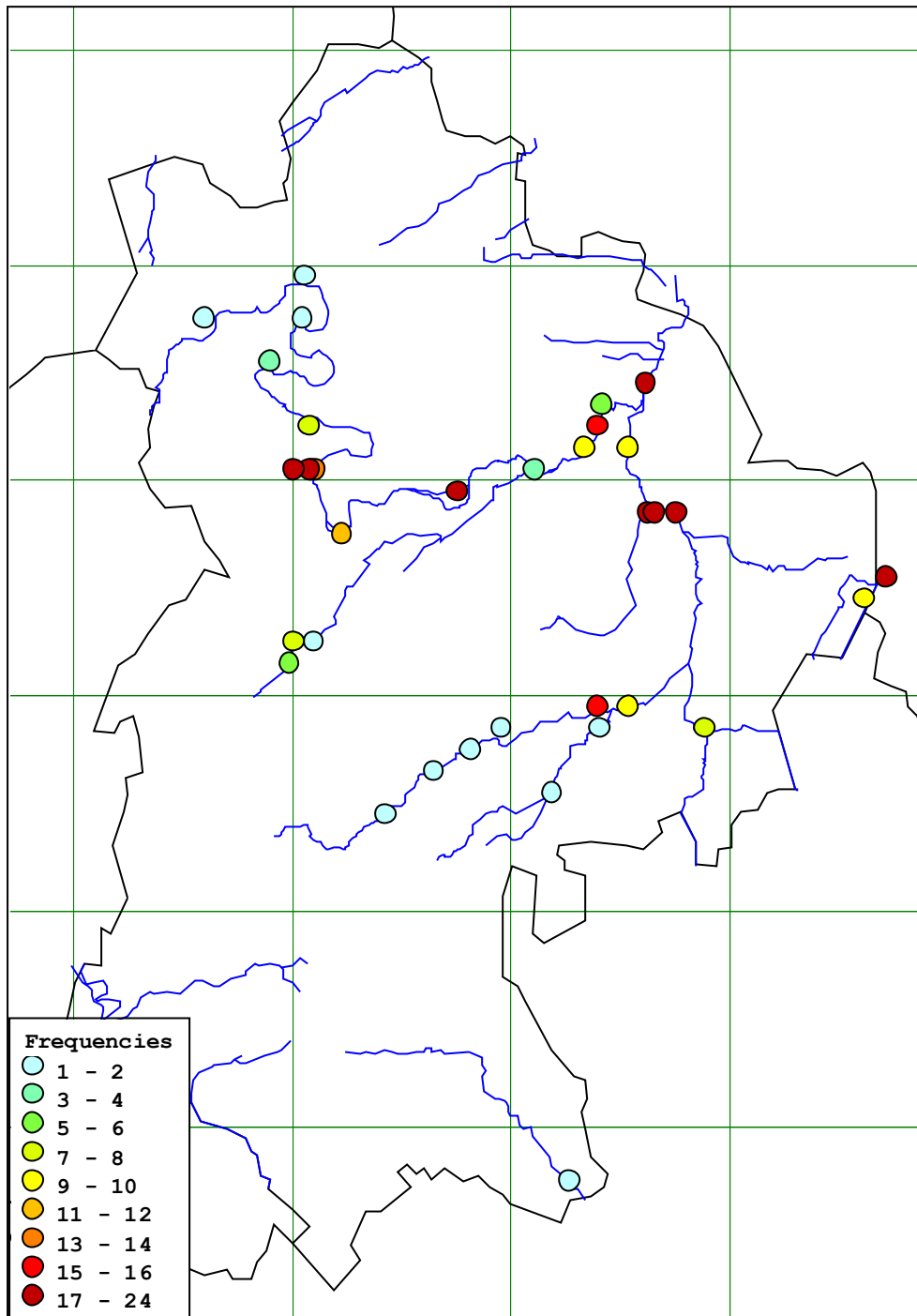
Targets

- A. Maintain the range of the European otter in Bedfordshire, as defined in the 2004 Bedfordshire county survey (25 of the 75 sites surveyed positive for otters)
- B. Restore otters to the Rivers Kym, Til and Ouzel, and Elstow Brook and its associated lakes, confirmed by the presence of spraint in three of five years, by 2015





Fig. 1 **Distribution and frequency of spraint occurrence of the European otter (*Lutra lutra*) in Bedfordshire**



Source: Bedfordshire Otters and Rivers Project, www.ottersandrivers.org.uk



Proposed action

Abbreviations

BCC	Bedfordshire County Council	GST	The Greensand Trust
BNHS	Bedfordshire Natural History Society	IDB	Bedford Group of Internal Drainage Boards
BRCC	Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity	NE	Natural England
EA	Environment Agency	WT	The Wildlife Trust

Action	Implemented by
Policy and legislation	
1. By 2008 inform the five Bedfordshire local authorities of their statutory obligations concerning otters.	
Site safeguard and management	
2. Identify by 2009 stretches of river where the natural movement of otters is impeded (such as at large weirs).	
3. By 2009 develop plans to alleviate impediments to otter movement up and down stream	
4. By 2015 implement plans to alleviate impediments to otter movement	
5. Identify five areas of riparian habitat in need of habitat enhancement for otters or a management regime to benefit otters per year	EA (1 per year)
6. Secure appropriate habitat management and/or enhancement of five areas of riverine habitat per year	EA (1 per year)
7. When development is being considered ensure appropriate mitigation measures are incorporated into transport and other development schemes affecting watercourses known to have otters present	Local authorities
8. Ensure on an ongoing basis, that all flood defence and routine river management is compatible with otter habitat requirements	EA (main rivers), IDB/local authorities (other watercourses)



Species management and protection

9. Build a minimum of two otter holts annually	EA (1 holt)
10. Produce and install by 2009 a way-marking disc advising dog walkers to keep their dogs on a lead along public footpaths on the Rivers Great Ouse, Ivel, Ivel Navigation, Flit, Ouzel and Elstow Brook, with the aim of reducing disturbance to otters	BRCC, BCC
11. Develop plans if road accident black spots are identified (i.e. two or more otters killed at one location), to provide alternative routes for otters or to employ otter fencing within six months of a black spot being identified	

Advisory

12. Provide advice to 25 riparian owners and managers per year about the requirements of otters and the importance of sympathetic management of their habitats, targeting otter hotspots and locations where riparian habitat enhancement is needed, until all owners and managers have been contacted.	
13. Provide information on otters and their requirements and conservation to 10 key groups per year (e.g., angling clubs, fisheries), by 2010 or until all such groups have been contacted	

Future research and monitoring

14. Conduct regular systematic surveys to maintain up to date information on otter populations (includes a full survey of otters every 5 years and known sites annually, monthly where possible)	BRCC
15. Monitor all artificial otter holts every three years to assess their condition, and maintain a database of the collected information	
16. Monitor annually fish stocks of the Ouse, Ivel and Ouzel using Environment Agency fish survey data when available, to compare fish density with otter spraint monitoring results	
17. Collect data on otter mortality in Bedfordshire to assess its importance; submit corpses to the Environment Agency	

Communication and publicity

18. Use the otter as a flagship species to publicise the importance to biodiversity of water quality and riparian habitats whenever possible	BRCC, GST, WT
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19. Continue to provide annual training for otter monitors	
20. Manage the otter monitors, collect data twice yearly and submit results to the BRMC	
21. Disseminate all otter survey reports to local authorities, the Environment Agency, Natural England, the Internal Drainage Board and other interested parties	



Monitoring the Action Plan

BedsLife will review this action plan every five years.

Complementary plans

There is an UK national action plan for the European otter by the UK Biodiversity Steering Group.

Cambridgeshire, Northamptonshire and Hertfordshire have also written action plans for the otter.

This action plan should be read alongside the habitat action plans written for reedbed, floodplain grazing marsh and rivers and streams in Bedfordshire and Luton.

Acknowledgements

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