

Otter (*Lutra lutra*)

The otter is adapted to a semi-aquatic lifestyle and is generally found along the banks of watercourses and in other wetland habitats including estuaries. Otters are carnivorous and generally hunt their prey in the water. Fish make up over 80% of their diet. Otters are territorial and their territories can encompass as much as 40km of riverine habitat. Within these there may be up to 30 resting sites, including underground 'holts' (cavities in the root plates of bankside trees, piles of logs, flood debris, drains, caves and holes in rockfalls), and above ground 'couches' (in reedbeds or tall herb vegetation and scrub). Otters are generally confined to watercourse corridors, and will therefore only encounter the Highway Agency's soft estate where roads cross or run adjacent to watercourses.

The UKBAP Priority Habitats of particular importance to this species are: chalk rivers, estuaries, fens, reedbeds, and wet woodlands.

Current status

National status

The otter is listed on Appendix I of CITES, Appendix II of the Bern Convention and Annexes II and IV of the Habitats Directive. It is protected under Schedule 5 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and Schedule 2 of the Conservation (Natural Habitats &c.) Regulations (1994), and is also listed as a Priority Species in the UK Biodiversity Action Plan. The European sub-species is also listed as globally threatened on the IUCN/WCMC Red Data List. Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) can be designated on the basis of the presence of otters.

Otters are now increasing in number and distribution throughout England, extending south and east from traditional strongholds in Wales, Scotland, northern England, East Anglia and south-west England. Otters are still relatively rare in midland and south-eastern counties of England.

Status on the network

Otters are present in all areas of the network (although there is only one reference to otters in the Highway Agency network ecological information, at two sites on the A16).

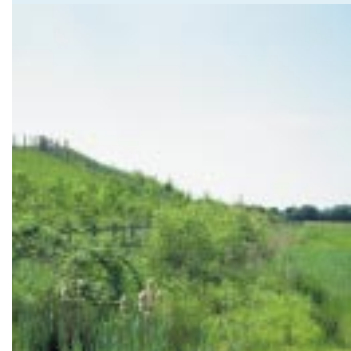
Current factors affecting the species

Incidental mortality of otters on roads

At least 100 otters are killed on roads in England and Wales each year, and otter road deaths are considered to be an important source of mortality. In response to this threat, the UKBAP provides an action for the DTLR to 'attempt to limit accidental killing or injury by the provision of road underpasses'.

Loss and deterioration of habitat

New road developments and road improvement schemes may lead to the loss of bankside features needed for breeding and resting, and to the fragmentation of the otter habitat by obstructing access along linear water features. Roads can also cause the pollution of watercourses, leading either to a decline in prey species or to a build up of toxins up the food chain, causing disease and mortality in otters.



Current action

Best practice guidelines for work affecting otters, including the provision of clear span bridges over watercourses wherever possible and suitable mitigation measures are provided in DMRB Volume 10.

The Highways Agency is undertaking a project to identify sites on the network which pose a threat to otters. Underpasses, ledges and artificial holts have been installed on several road schemes, including the Birmingham Northern Relief Road and the A46 Batheaston bypass. Research is being carried out into the effectiveness of the measures undertaken.

Many local Wildlife Trusts have full-time Otters and Rivers Project officers, who compile up-to-date information on local otter distribution. In some areas (e.g. Hampshire) these officers are working in collaboration with the Highways Agency.

Objectives

The main aim of the Highways Agency Species Action Plan for the otter is to reduce the level of incidental otter mortality on existing roads, and to ensure that new road developments avoid or adequately mitigate any potential impacts on the species.

| | Objective | Proposed actions |
|---|---|------------------|
| A | To avoid impacts of new road schemes or improvements on otters. | 5 |
| B | To mitigate unavoidable impacts on otters and/or their habitats. | |
| C | To reduce the level of incidental otter mortality on existing roads. | 6, 8 |
| D | To safeguard and enhance known otter populations close to the road network. | 4, 7, 8, 9 |
| E | To raise the awareness of HA staff, Managing Agents and consultants regarding the significance of otters on the network. | 1, 2, 10 |
| F | To safeguard and enhance potentially suitable habitat features for otters within the soft estate and wetland habitats downstream of road crossings. | 2, 3, 4 |
| G | To develop a greater knowledge of the distribution of otters in the soft estate. | |

Proposed action

The following table lists the actions required to achieve the objectives set out in this Plan. For some of the actions, potential partners have

been assigned as likely sources of cooperation. Targets are provided to give an indication of the timescale for the proposed action.

| | Action (<i>continued</i>) | Potential partners | Target |
|---|--|--------------------|--------|
| | <i>Policy, guidance and advice</i> | | |
| 1 | Review the DMRB Advice Note on otters to ensure advice provided is up to date. | EA | 2004 |
| 2 | Provide detailed information in TRMM on the management of the soft estate for the benefit of otters. | EA | 2005 |

| | <i>Action (continued)</i> | Potential partners | Target |
|----|---|--|---------|
| | <i>Research and monitoring</i> | | |
| 3 | Continue national scheme to identify sites on existing roads which pose a threat to otters, and identify practical remedial measures. | Wildlife Trusts, EA | 2006 |
| 4 | Liase with relevant authorities to identify roads which form a potential barrier to otter dispersal and where such fragmentation could be mitigated. | Wildlife Trusts, Local Authorities, EA | 2004 |
| 5 | Monitor 20 sites where otter mortality is perceived to be a problem for five years and record any road traffic accidents. | - | 2002-7 |
| | <i>Mitigation and Management</i> | | |
| 6 | For all construction and maintenance works near to known otter routes, ensure that measures for the protection of otters are undertaken. | EN, local WT EA | Ongoing |
| 7 | For all new road schemes and road improvements, include search for records of otters in desk study at stage 1 and in surveys at stage 2. Early identification of this constraint may allow impacts to be avoided. | - | Ongoing |
| 8 | Regular checks of artificial holts, otter underpasses and fences should be carried out as part of maintenance activities. | - | Ongoing |
| 9 | Where impacts of new schemes and road improvements on otter habitat are unavoidable, consider the options for road underpasses, otter havens, other compensatory habitat improvements, artificial holts and pollution control. Install 250 new protection measures and 20 artificial holts or other measures. | EA | 2012 |
| 10 | Increase the amount of available otter habitat by removing barriers to dispersal and re-creating suitable habitat wherever possible, particularly where development provides options to do so. | Local Authorities, Wildlife Trusts, Environment Agency | Ongoing |
| | <i>Communications and publicity</i> | | |
| 11 | Information on otters should be included in environmental training for HA staff and Managing Agents | - | 2003 |

Links with other plans

This plan should be read in conjunction with the HAP for water features.

Otters are listed as a Priority Species in 30 LBAPS, many of which cite the UKBAP's action for otters, namely to 'reduce accidental deaths by provision of underpasses etc'. Other actions for otters ascribed to the Highways Agency include 'open up pinch points on otter routes' (Gloucestershire) and to 'ensure that all dead otters are handed to the appropriate research programme (Sedgemoor).

The otters are a Regional Biodiversity indicator for English Nature's South West, North West and North East Regions.

Lead partners

The lead partners for the otter in the UKBAP are the Wildlife Trusts and the Environment Agency.