

## Otter survey information sheet

In the early 1950s otters *Lutra lutra* were widespread and common in Essex. Over the subsequent thirty years they experienced a massive decline and by the mid 1980s they were extinct in the county. This was due to a decline in habitat quality and environmental contaminants accumulating in the food chain leading to poor reproductive and survival success.

Since a ban on some of these agricultural chemicals, and the removal of lead from petrol, otter numbers have increased and their range has expanded. Some of this spread is due to deliberate releases in different catchments, and some to natural re-colonisation from the Suffolk population to the north, but otters are now a resident in over half the river catchments in Essex.

### Identification

The only animal likely to be confused with the otter is the North American mink *Mustela vison* (pictured right), but this is a much smaller animal, about the size of a cat or ferret. Look out for the dark coat and distinctive white chin patch. Adult otters are up to 1.2m long and weigh 7-11kg depending on age and sex (twice the size of a mink and ten times heavier). Otters have distinctly lighter fur under the throat than elsewhere on their body (see photo).

### Habitat and ecology

Otters are semi-aquatic mammals that spend most of their lives in, or near water. However if they are searching for new territory they may walk many miles overland, even from one catchment to another. Otters can breed in any season and cubs remain with their mother for anything up to a year, after which the family group breaks up, often prompted by the mother.

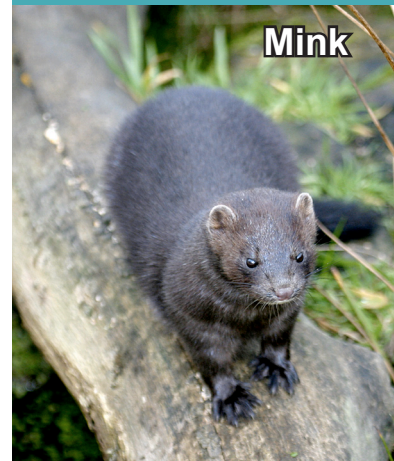
The males are fiercely territorial and bite wounds around the face and rear are commonplace where there are large, competing populations. This is less of a problem in Essex as our rivers are not yet fully occupied, but males still pose a threat to a mother with her young. The female otter's natal holt (where the cubs are born) is usually well concealed to avoid contact with aggressive males that may attack and kill vulnerable young. The consequence is that these holts are exceptionally difficult to locate during surveys.

The cubs emerge after two months and while able to swim, are still totally reliant on their mother for food. She will often take them to small tributaries to teach them to fish, safe from strong currents or male otters. Most activity takes place from dusk to dawn with otters resting during the day.

### Threats

Otters get killed every year crossing Essex roads. As otters are mainly nocturnal, the death rate rises dramatically over winter when the hours of darkness are greatest and especially when dusk co-incides with rush hour traffic. Most deaths occur where roads cross water courses, often due to unsuitable bridge designs or high water levels.

It is illegal to trap or harm a wild otter but some still die every year from deliberate persecution, or accidental drowning in fyke nets and crayfish traps. The latter have to be licensed by the Environment Agency, but many illegal nets have been found in East Anglia and in some cases, a mother and cubs have died in a single trap. You should report suspect traps to the Environment Agency or your local Wildlife Trust, but do not interfere with them.



Mink

Non-native mink (above) are often confused with otters as they also hunt in lakes, streams and rivers. They are half the length of otters, and have much darker fur and often a small white patch under the chin. Otters have light fur under the throat, a thick, tapering tail and a characteristic 'spiky' appearance to their coat when emerging from the water.



Otter



# Otter field signs

## Spraints

The droppings (spraints) of the otter are very distinctive and give a positive indication of species presence. They are used as territory markers so are found in prominent locations such as logs, rocks, ledges under bridges and at the base of trees. Where there are no obvious sites, otters may create their own sign heap by twisting grass or scraping up silt or sand into a pile and placing a spraint on top (or sometimes inside).

Spraints vary from dark smears, to relatively loose droppings 5-10cm long consisting mainly of fish bones and scales but with remains of shellfish, fur or feathers possible. They are black and tarry when fresh (main photo) but become whiter and more crumbly with age (photo inset).

Otter spraints may smell fishy, musty or sometimes quite sweet (similar to jasmine tea!) Mink scats may be found in similar locations but are usually dark, twisted, 5-8cm long and have a really abnoxious odour.

## Tracks and footprints

Otter prints are about the same size as a medium to large dog, both fore and hind paws having five webbed toes (dogs have four toes) but sometimes the fifth toe is hard to see. The fore print is usually about 5cm wide and long, although the heel of the hind print extends further. With experience, otter prints are quite distinct from dog, fox and mink but for the purposes of RIVERSEARCH are only counted as a confirmed record in the presence of spraint.

## Feeding signs

These can include a wide range of prey items such as partially eaten fish, fish scales, eggs, frogs, piles of mussel shells or crayfish remains. It is often difficult to be certain whether feeding remains are the result of otters or other animals, such as mink or fox, unless there are other corroborating field signs.

## Holts and couches

These are areas where otters lie up during the day, often above ground in dense bankside vegetation, wood and brash piles or, in the case of natal holts, a den in a bank, or under hollow tree roots, often with the entrance below water level. Again, it is sometimes difficult to be certain if it is an otter site, in the absence of other distinctive field signs, but a well occupied holt will often have piles of spraint or footprints nearby.

Otters will also climb trees, such as bankside pollards, and rest in the crown. Some willow pollards contain considerable piles of spraint from months, or even years, of use. Sometimes it pays to look up!

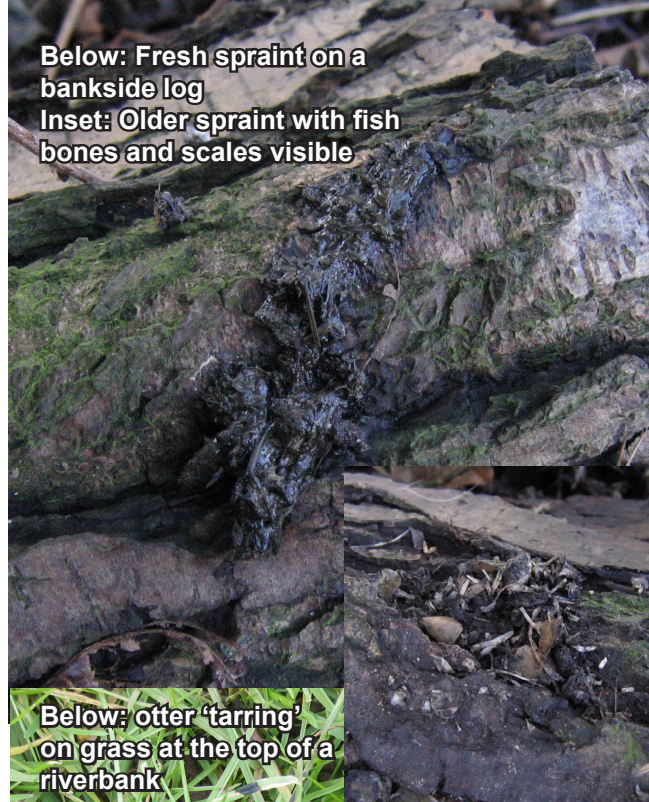
## Riversearch

Riversearch was set up to offer training and experience to volunteers with an interest in freshwater habitats and species. We undertake annual surveys of rivers and wetlands in Essex, which are then used to inform important conservation work throughout the county.

If you would like to know more then contact:  
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Photos - mink and otter: © wildstock.co.uk  
Otter tracks: Peter Margetts  
Other photos: Darren Tansley

Below: Fresh spraint on a  
bankside log  
Inset: Older spraint with fish  
bones and scales visible



Below: otter 'tarring'  
on grass at the top of a  
riverbank



Otter tracks in firm mud.  
Unlike a dog or fox, The five  
toes are not symmetrical  
around the pad



Fish scales and  
remains may indicate  
where otters have been  
feeding