

Managing Your Land To Benefit Otters



Sussex
Wildlife Trust

Otters in the UK and Sussex

The European otter (*Lutra lutra*) is a protected species in the UK following a dramatic crash in their numbers in the 1960s. Otters came close to extinction in the UK and much of Europe. Otters have recovered in many areas but are still struggling to return to Sussex. Prior to the 1950s, otters were common throughout Sussex on all river catchments.

Occasional (mostly male) otters migrate into Sussex from Hampshire and Kent. By helping to create interlinking corridors of good river and wetland, with quiet sanctuary areas, feeding and resting places, you can help encourage this enigmatic species to return.

Many people love otters, but few people realise their place at the top of the food chain makes them an important indicator of good river health. When otters recover to their original extent in Sussex, water quality and the environment will once again be healthy for both people and wildlife.



What do Otters need?

There are a few essential things that otters (and particularly breeding females) need to survive:-

Food – Including eels, fish, crustaceans, molluscs, amphibians, reptiles, dragonflies and even slugs.

Shelter – Around 30 resting places in one otter territory.

No disturbance – Otters are nocturnal and need quiet, undisturbed places to rest during the day.

Good, interconnected habitat – Otters can use up to 40km of river as their territory. This means they need to move frequently within and between patches of good habitat to feed, breed and rest.

Breeding habitat – In order to successfully rear young, a female otter needs a sheltered location, often with a pool where she can teach her young to swim and catch food. It is better if it does not flood regularly. Otter breeding holts are often located some distance away from main rivers.

Fresh water – Otters can live on the coast or inland, but need freshwater to keep their coat clean.



A natural Otter holt on the side of a river bank-
© FSouthgate

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How can I help otters?

By providing good quality (wetland) habitats throughout your land, which are undisturbed by people and dogs. By not polluting or over-abstracting water, and by encouraging healthy native fish stocks.

How can I create shelter (Couches, Holts and Hovers) for otters?

It's surprisingly easy! Couches, holts and hovers are the uncovered and covered places that otters use to rest, sleep and breed. Natural holts and hovers might be the roots of an old riverside oak or ash tree, the crown of a coppiced willow, a crevice in a rock face or pile of rocks, some dense scrub or a flattened area of reedbed.

Simple things you can do to create good habitat for otters

- Leave the root plates of fallen trees – otters will use cavities behind these to rest
- Retain mature riverside trees with good root plates to help prevent river bank erosion, maintain shade and create refuges for fish, and to provide natural holt sites.
- Manage your land to create a 'mosaic' of interconnected habitats and farmland
- Encourage occasional thick patches of scrub, particularly blackthorn, bramble and reed
- Create islands in lakes and ponds
- Encourage shaws and clumps of trees within, and at the edges of the floodplain
- Leave parts of river banks uncut / un-grazed to encourage dense clumps of vegetation
- Create piles of woody brash as habitat piles and potential otter couches
- Pollard or coppice trees. Otters lie up in pollard crowns
- Manage woodland at low intensity – cutting or coppicing in block rotations to minimise disturbance
- If trees/scrub on riverbanks need clearing, clear as late in the year as possible and only on one bank
- Fence a corner of a riverside field or meander. Plant it with scrub or allow it to scrub over naturally
- Install an artificial otter holt along your land – see Wildcall for advice sheets
- Don't disturb natural piles of boulders near rivers. These can be used by otters for shelter
- Maintain hedgerows near rivers and protect them from livestock and excessive flail mowing
- Retain and restore traditionally managed water meadows, reedbeds, fens and grazing marshes
- Prevent pollution by farming in accordance with Codes of Good Agricultural Practice
- Report any pollution incidents immediately to the Environment Agency on 0370 8506506
- Create and maintain wetland areas. This could be a reedbed, a pond, an oxbow lake, a marshy area or a floodplain woodland (see Sussex Wildlife Trust for advice).
- Where possible, leave flood debris (tree branches etc) in your river channel—these are often used as Otter resting , crossing or sprinting sites



European Otter © S Bray

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Man made recycled plastic Otter holt



Man made log pile Otter holt

Things to think about when creating habitat for otters

Otters and dogs

Generally otters and dogs do not get on and frequent disturbance by dogs will cause otters to leave an area. Remember to create otter habitat away from busy footpaths or dog walking routes.

Don't manage exclusively for otters

The management of land for a specific species is useful when they are rare like the otter but it is better to manage all your land sympathetically. Managing for one species can exclude or compromise the habitat of other species. Managing your land as a mosaic of habitats within the local landscape will be good for a wide variety of wildlife.

Otters and fisheries

If you have a fishery on or near your land (particularly if it is a carp fishery), then you may want to ensure that you have some fencing and other precautions in place before you encourage otters to become resident (See Wildcall for details). Although otters cover large territories and eat a wide range of food, 'trophy' carp which are sluggish in winter can be an easy food source for otters.

Otters and mink

Otters tend to deter mink. However, it's easy to confuse mink with otters so make sure you know the difference.

Otters and the law

Otters are fully protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, Schedule 5. It is an offence to kill, injure or knowingly disturb an otter, damage or obstruct an otter holt. Amendments introduced by the CRow Act and the Habitats Directive mean you should always survey for this species or seek professional advice prior to carrying out work which may adversely affect them.

Consent for riverside works

Be aware that any digging or tree planting works within 8m of a main river will require consent from the land drainage team of your local Environment Agency. Sussex Wildlife Trust can provide advice on how to fill in forms.

What if I need to remove or manage some habitat which is being used by otters?

If you need to remove some habitat that you know otters use regularly then consult your local Wildlife Trust or Environment Agency representative. They will help you to apply for a licence from Natural England to carry out the work in a way which is least damaging to otters. www.gov.uk/government/collections/otter-licences

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Contacts

Sussex Wildlife Trust

www.sussexwt.org.uk

01273 497555

International Otter Survival Fund (IOSF)

01471822 487

www.otter.org/contact.aspx

Sussex Otter Species Action Plan

www.biodiversitysussex.org.uk/species/

Wildcall

01273 494777

Wildcall@sussexwt.org.uk

Natural England

0845 600 3078

enquiries.southeast@naturalengland.org.uk

www.naturalengland.org.uk/regions/southeast/contacts

Environment Agency

Ask for Fisheries & Biodiversity
or Land Drainage consent teams

03708 506506

www.environment-agency.gov.uk

References & Further Reading

- Liles G. (2003) *-Otter Breeding Sites. Conservation and Management.* Conserving Natura 2000 Rivers Conservation Technical Series No.5 English Nature, Peterborough.
- Chanin P. (2003) *Ecology of the European Otter.* Conserving Natura 2000 Rivers Ecology Series No.10 English Nature, Peterborough.
- IOSF—How to Build An Otter Holt— www.otter.org/researchHowToBuildAnOtterHolt.aspx



European Otter © S Bray

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