

# Species Action Plan

# Otter



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Last updated: January 2024

**Common name:** European Otter (Otter)

**Scientific name:** *Lutra lutra*

**Conservation status:** Protected in the UK under the Wildlife and Countryside Act, 1981. Priority Species under the UK Post-2010 Biodiversity Framework. European Protected Species (EPS) under Annex IV of the European Habitats Directive. Listed as 'Near Threatened' on the global IUCN Red List of Threatened Species.

**Food and Habitat:** Otters feed mainly on fish and eels, but they also prey on amphibians (especially in spring), birds and their eggs, insects, worms and crustaceans. They are found throughout the UK, associated with coasts, streams, lakes, wetlands, waterways and adjacent habitats wherever there is clean water and a plentiful supply of food. Inland, the elusive otter may use a variety of dry resting sites along or near the waterbody, breeding in 'holts' or larger covered dens, located within bankside holes and tunnels, areas of dense vegetation, tree roots, or rock piles. Otters benefit from plentiful undisturbed bankside vegetation, though breeding holts may also be distant from waterbodies and are difficult to find.

**Habits and Range:** Otters are most active at dawn or dusk and at night, and are largely solitary animals except when in a breeding pair or as a mother with young. They travel over a large range and are highly territorial, with territories varying in size depending on habitat and food supply, but it is not uncommon for an otter to use up to 20km or more of river habitat.

**Population trends:** In the 1970s, after undergoing a rapid decline, the otter was restricted to Scotland and a few small areas of England and Wales. Now, the otter is extending its range into former territories and increasing locally, though the population is still fragmented. Suitable riparian habitat remains a limiting factor.



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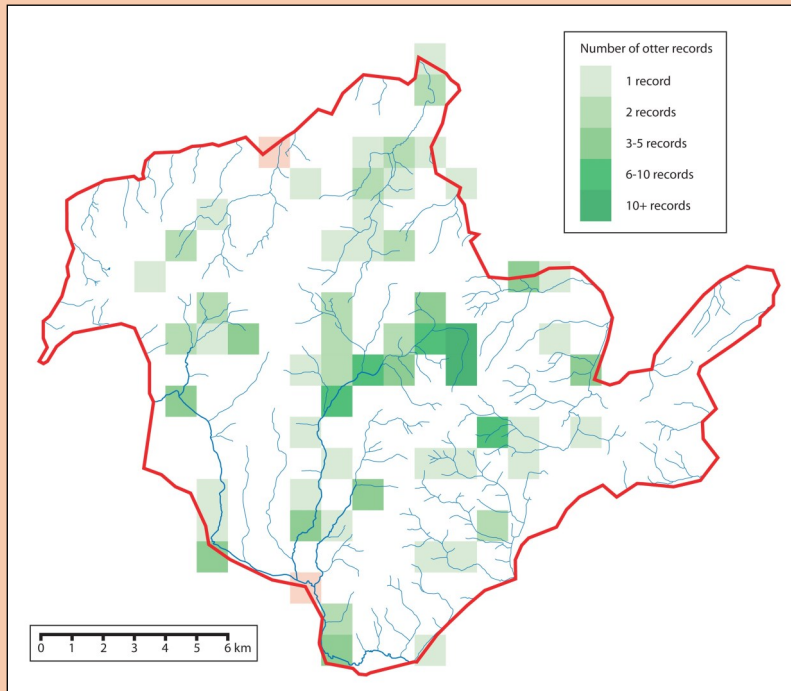
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# Otter in the Stepping Stones Project Area



Data held by the National Biodiversity Network (NBN) has been analysed to identify records of otter within 1km grid squares in the Stepping Stones Project Area from 1990 onwards. This data has been mapped to show the density of records within each 1km grid square, where darker squares indicate more records. Older (pre-1990) records are shown by pink squares.

Additional mapping was subsequently conducted to plot all the rivers, streams and minor watercourses in the area, so that the incidence of existing records along specific riparian habitats could be more easily seen and interpreted.

Analysis of these results shows that otter are associated with a number of key watercourses within the Project Area. Most notable of these is the River East Onny and its tributaries, all the way up to its headwaters at Darnford Brook, Colliersford Gutter and Wildmoor Pool on the Long Mynd where a large number of records occur, and to the Marehay Farm—Far Gatten area to the west. Other records are associated with the River West Onny at Lydham, More and Linley, and again at the headwaters of this watercourse around Mucklewick Hill, Grit Hill and The Bog. Records also occur along the Crifin Brook and on the Onny at Plowden, as well as from the Hope and Habberley Valleys in the west and north of the Project Area. Valleys on the east side of the Long Mynd also contained a small number of records, including in Carding Mill Valley,

## Further Surveys for Otter in the Project Area

The mapping and analysis conducted as part of this Species Action Plan also shows a number of areas where no otter records occur. This may be because otters are absent from these areas, or because no survey work has been conducted along these watercourses and their tributaries. Gathering additional information on the status and distribution of otter in the Project Area, as well as surveys of the current state of riparian habitats, will be an important part of action to conserve and enhance the area's otter population.

Otters deposit 'spraints' (with a characteristic sweet, musky odour) on prominent features throughout their range in order to mark their territory and keep in social contact with neighbours. Surveys concentrate on looking for these spraints at key sites along the watercourse, such as beneath bridges and on prominent rocks and logs, as well as other field signs such as footprints, slides, dens and holts, and prey remains. They must be conducted after at least 5 days without rain, so that any field signs are not washed away.

Where otters are known to use a watercourse, further surveys will concentrate on assessing the status of the adjacent habitats to identify and prioritise areas where habitat management, creation or expansion can be implemented to enhance riparian habitats and provide stronger habitat linkages between watercourses and/or high-value locations.



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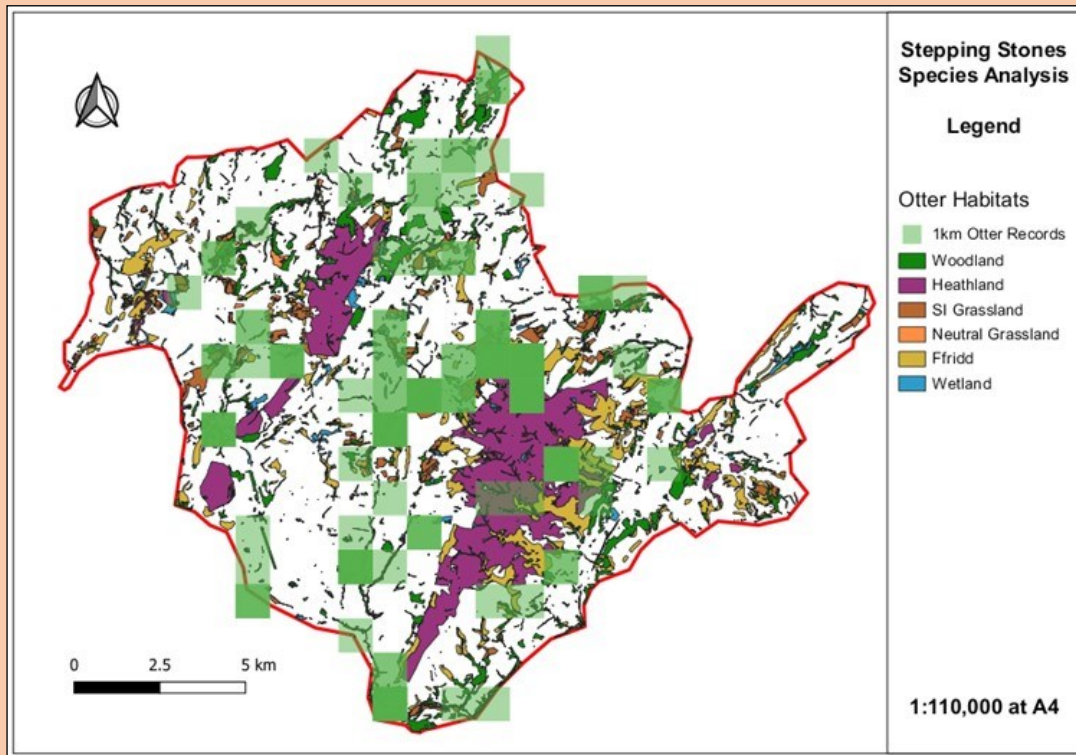


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# Habitat Management for Otter in the Project Area

New otter and habitat surveys of watercourses, together with existing records, will be used to focus in on areas where potential habitat management for otter can be implemented. Whilst frequently associated with vegetated river corridors and wetlands, otters also use a variety of natural habitats where these occur in proximity to watercourses, including those shown on the habitat map below. Additional layers that map all watercourses and areas of mixed/coniferous woodland will be produced as part of this Action Plan and, together, these mapping layers and the results of habitat surveys will be used to create a Habitat Connectivity Strategy for otter. This will identify and prioritise areas where practical habitat management will be of most benefit to otters within the Project Area.



Practical habitat management for otter in the Stepping Stones Project will focus on three areas:

- **Expansion** of existing habitats of value to otter, such as riparian woodlands, scrub, tree corridors, fridd, tall herb vegetation, conservation/rough grassland and waterside wetlands;
- **Creation** of new habitats, such as woodland and scrub to shelter and buffer stream banks, or areas of tree, scrub and hedgerow cover that link isolated habitats with the watercourse;

## Conservation Objectives for Otter

- Understand more about the population of otter in the Stepping Stones Project Area, and the habitats they use, through a programme of otter presence/absence and habitat surveys.
- Assess habitat connectivity along and between otter sites and watersheds and develop a Habitat Connectivity Strategy including locations for the creation of new connecting habitats.
- Increase the value of existing riparian habitats, and create or strengthen movement corridors between high-value habitats and watersheds, through implementation of practical management interventions.
- Increase understanding of otter conservation priorities amongst local communities and landowners through a programme of information dissemination, practical management advice and management support.



# Conservation Actions for Otter

- By March 2024, prepare a *SAP Summary Factsheet for Otter* for dissemination to farmers, landowners, wildlife groups and other interested parties, which summarises the species and provides advice for the management of habitats to benefit otter.
- Commission and complete a programme of otter surveys along all main watercourses and their tributaries within the Project Area, as well as those where no otter records currently exist. Update the map of otter records with any new locations where evidence of otter is identified.
- Conduct a Habitat Survey along watercourses where otter records occur, to map riparian habitats and help identify potential sites for habitat management, creation or expansion for otter.
- Conduct a Habitat Survey to map upland habitats between key otter watercourses and feed into the Habitat Connectivity Strategy for otter. Assess these upland corridors for their potential for habitat management or creation to support otter movement between watersheds.
- Update the Project GIS layers to map habitats of value to otter, including mixed and coniferous woodland, areas of streamside tree and scrub cover, all watercourses and associated wetlands.
- Produce a Habitat Connectivity Strategy to identify and prioritise key sites for habitat creation, restoration, expansion or management to benefit otter within the Project Area.
- Liaise with local farmers, landowners and smallholders and conduct a programme of practical habitat management interventions in support of otter, aimed at improving, expanding and connecting key habitats within the Project Area.
- Identify and pursue opportunities with relevant landowners to expand existing or create new riparian wetland habitats along watercourses within the Project Area.
- Carry out a river naturalisation survey on the River Onny catchment identifying any barriers to fish migration or engineering structures that negatively impact on otters or other riparian wildlife.
- Pursue opportunities to link existing areas of woodland and scrub within 200m of watercourses with areas of new tree, hedgerow and scrub planting or buffering/expansion of existing features.
- Create new den and holt opportunities and terrestrial movement corridors along known otter watercourses through creation of new riparian tree and scrub habitats, fencing to lessen the impact of livestock on riverside vegetation, and creation of rough grassland, scrub and tall herb buffers in open areas of riverside habitat.

## About Stepping Stones

Stepping Stones is an innovative landscape-scale conservation programme. The aim is to connect wildlife habitats by strengthening or creating 'stepping stones' and corridors of habitat between the Long Mynd and Stiperstones, and beyond. In practice, this means creating and linking areas of heathland, flower-rich grasslands and broadleaved woodland by a network of wildlife-rich hedgerows, road verges, hillsides, streamside wetlands and strong riparian corridors.



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