

The Return of the Otter



Paul Holton, biodiversity officer with Aylesbury Vale District Council, reports that an otter is apparently hunting along the River Ouse in the Buckingham area, and living under a pile of logs in Bourton Park. Early morning dog walkers confirm sighting the mammal which feeds and hunts mainly at night feeding mainly on fish, waterbirds, amphibians and crustaceans. In the Buckingham Ouse there are large numbers of signal crayfish which help to sustain them. The animals mark their territories by leaving their distinctive smelling spraints or droppings which often contain fish bones and scales. These lively and inquisitive mammals may initially be mistaken for the unwelcome and destructive mink, which are not a native species, but otters, long established in Britain since the end of the last glaciations, can be distinguished by their much larger and more powerful body, broader snout, pale chest and throat, and lighter fur. The AVDC biodiversity team believe that otters have almost certainly been in the town for some time as their territory can range up to 25 miles along the river system.

Otters had almost disappeared from England by the twentieth century, a result of pesticide poisoning, persecution and habitat destruction, but they have since recovered in recent years due to a ban on harmful pesticides, legal protection and an improvement in water quality bringing fish back to rivers again. Conservation projects across the country aim to provide suitable habitat for otters. Trusts such as our local Bucks, Berks Bucks and Oxon Wildlife Trust have led the way on such projects, but many local Trusts still need help from volunteers.

Michael Ghirelli