



Fact Sheet: Otters



Otters in the Park

One or possibly two families visit the main lake in the Park. Rangers and visitors alike have witnessed (2010) a mother and two youngsters feeding and playing on the lake edge and in the water between the bridge and the end of the island. A second female has been seen in the River Ouse adjacent to the Park and tracks have been spotted near a drainage culvert that links the Nature Reserve to Grebe Lake. Current thinking is that otters have made their home in the Ouse and in one of the brooks draining into the lake from the northwest. This activity comes after the Park Rangers have taken steps to encourage otters to settle in the area by installing man-made holts in suitable locations.

The name

The word *otter* comes from the Old English word *otor* or *oter*. This word was derived from the word which also gave rise to the English words *water*. The male otter is called a *dog (otter)* and the female a *bitch (otter)*. A baby is called a *whelp* or *pup*. A group of otters are called a *bevy, family, lodge* or *romp*, the latter being descriptive of their playful nature.

Description

Otters have long slim bodies with short limbs and webbed paws. They have sharp claws on their feet and long muscular tails. They have a very soft, insulated underfur which is protected by their outer layer of long guard hair. This traps a layer of air, and keeps them dry and warm under water. Their high metabolic rate helps to keep them warm. Adults range in size from 0.7m to 1.8 m (2 to 6 feet) in length and 5 to 45 kilograms (10 to 100 pounds) in weight.

To anyone seeing one for the first time, the over-riding impression is how big they are. Anything smaller is likely to be a mink.



Habitats

Inland, otters are at home in unpolluted lakes and rivers; however, they prefer river banks with good cover so that they can emerge and have a look round before climbing out. They build a den or take over a suitable location which can be a man-made structure. The otter's den is called a holt or couch. They will tolerate humans but do not like disturbance.

Food

The European Otter's diet consists mainly of fish. However, when fish are scarce they can have an alternative diet of birds, insects, frogs, crustaceans and sometimes small mammals. The Park otters also appear to eat crayfish and mussels. They find the former under stones and the latter they bring ashore before eating. Inland otters must eat 15% of their body-weight a day. Most species hunt for 3 to 5 hours a day and nursing mothers up to 8 hours a day.

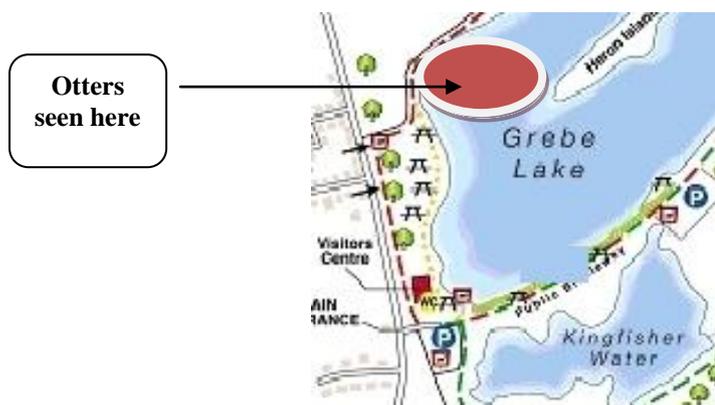
Otters are very active, chasing their prey in the water or searching the beds of rivers, and lakes. Most species live beside water, entering it mainly to hunt or travel, otherwise spending much of their time on land to avoid their fur becoming waterlogged. Normally they are nocturnal but the Park otters are certainly active during the day, possibly because they are finding it difficult to get enough food.

Breeding

Otters can breed at any time of year. A single male otter can be father to several families. This is probably the case in the Park where a mother and offspring have been seen in the lake but sightings of the father have been rare.

Otters are pregnant for between 60 to 86 days. The newborn are taken care of by the mother and any other offspring that are around. The young are able to swim after two months but stay with their mother for about a year. Otters live up to ten years.

Where to see otters in the Park





Otters have been spotted on the NW shore of the Grebe Lake, near the bridge and playing/fishing between this shore and Heron Island. They can be seen crossing between the different water bodies and leave clear trails from frequent use.

The best way of knowing that they are active is by watching the reactions of the different bird species. Gulls flock round, diving for scraps from the otters' prey; smaller birds – ducks, coots etc - retreat approx. 40 m. and keep a watching brief; and cormorants fly off to the safety of the trees.

Early morning seems to be the most promising time to see them, although they have been sighted before and at mid-day. While it is difficult to spot the otters, one may well spot evidence that they are around and you might even smell them!

Look out for

- flocking gulls scavenging in one particular area, together with the absence of other birds from that area;
- their distinctive paw prints which are surprisingly large (see below);
- otter slides - these can be seen by the river, where the pups have played;
- a fishy smell, presence of fish scales, etc. This is classic sign is called a spraint (scent) which the dog otter leaves in readily identifiable places round the park as a territorial marking. These are renewed at intervals, especially after a flood or rise in water levels.

Please note

Otters are very shy creatures and are easily frightened. They are best observed from a distance using binoculars. Trying to approach them is not advisable as they are easily scared off. Dogs must be kept firmly under control when otters are about.

If you see an otter or evidence that they are around, please identify the spot and walk on... Let the Rangers know what you have seen, where and when.

