

SPECIES OF THE WEEK



Eurasian Otter

Lutra lutra
Dobharchu

A rare but exciting sight in Irish waterways, the Eurasian Otter is an elusive member of our freshwater and marine ecosystems.

The Eurasian Otter has a truly huge range across the world and can be found across three continents. Stretching from western Europe and northern Africa, right across to eastern Asia. However most populations are under pressure from human activities such as intensive farming practices and industrialisation. Despite their decline in other countries, they are one of the most widely distributed mammals in Ireland. Leaving Ireland as one of the best countries in the world for stable otter populations. They can be found anywhere across the country from small streams to large rivers, as well as lakes, wetlands, estuaries and beaches.

If they are living in a saltwater environment then they must have a source of freshwater in order to bathe. An otter's coat is an excellent source of warmth and is also hydrodynamic, which is why they can move so quickly through the water. However salt causes the coat to become matted and unhealthy leading to a loss of insulation and making swimming more difficult. They need to bathe in freshwater and groom themselves regularly in order to keep their hair in good condition.

They are nocturnal predators and remain underground during the day, emerging during the night to hunt. Their diet consists mainly of fish but if fish are scarce they can also eat frogs, small mammals and even birds. Marine otters can also eat shellfish, crabs and sea urchins. If they're hunting at night or in murky waters, they use their long and sensitive whiskers to feel their surroundings and detect prey.

Otters are highly territorial with territories that can span 2 to 20 kilometres depending on food availability in the area. Male and female territories can overlap but same sex territories cannot and can lead to fights. They live in dens called "Holts" that are often previously rabbit burrows or fox dens that have been abandoned. Holts can have numerous entrances and an individual can have numerous holts throughout their territory. On land and out of the water, otters can use big tufts of grass called "couches" to rest on. These look like flattened areas of vegetation that will build up with more and more use. It's a rare thing to see but a quiet and careful walker may accidentally walk in on an otter just chilling on their couch!