

Tuesday Club Nature Notes

with Jan Flamank



EURASIAN OTTER

A member of the Mustelidae family, our native otters are surprisingly large, lithe and energetic carnivorous mammals. Semi-aquatic and mostly nocturnal, they can be difficult to see, despite being so large at over 1metre/ 3.25 feet long.

They are excellent swimmers and are the only Mustelid to have webbed feet, with five clawed toes. They swim low in the water, with only their eyes, nose and top of their broad head and back visible above the surface. Their strong ability in the water is helped by their long, muscular tail, which is slightly longer than their body, at up to 16 inches long. This tail acts as a rudder when they are swimming, and also helps them to balance on land when they stand up straight on their hind legs, to have a good look around.

Eurasian Otters are at home in both fresh and sea water, although river otters tend to be more nocturnally active than sea otters, who are diurnal, because they have to feed at low tide. River otters breed all year round, but coastal otters mainly breed in summer, with cubs emerging from their holt in autumn to take advantage of seasonal fish stocks. Coastal otters also need to have access to fresh water, to wash their dense coat clean after a swim in the sticky salt of the sea.

When otters dive for food, they close their nostrils and ears shut and can reach speeds of 7 miles an hour with their streamlined, muscular body. They have large lungs, enabling them to hold their breath for up to 4 minutes underwater. They have incredibly dense, sleek fur to insulate them from the cold water, with a double layered coat that has over 70,000 hairs per square metre!

Otters are carnivorous and have a wide diet, depending on their habitat, but with fish making up about 80% of their catch. They especially love eels, which are rich in fats. They are opportunistic feeders and their diet can also include octopus, frogs, toads, eggs, ducks and rabbits!

Otter poo, known as spraint, is small for such a large mammal, and is a complex messaging service to other otters. It is used to defend their territory, indicate readiness to mate and pronounce which otter has been there. The spraint contains over 100 different scent components, and otters spend a lot of time both marking their patch and 'reading' messages left by other otters.

Solitary and secretive creatures, most of us may only see the chain of silvery bubbles at the water surface that gives away their presence underwater. So, think yourself highly fortunate if you manage to see one in its full glory - feasting on its catch, basking in sunshine or preening that magnificent pelt to keep it waterproof and warm.

I saw a family of young otters on holiday in Scotland when I was little, and they were so enchanting, my twin brother and I decided we would like to keep one in the bath at home..... which of course, never happened.