

Learn about: Otter

As Gaeilge: Madra uisce; Scientific name: *Lutra lutra*



GREEN-SCHOOLS
STAY HOME - WATER

What is it?

The otter is a semi-aquatic mammal. It belongs to a group called “mustelids”, and is closely related to weasels, stoats, badgers and mink. There are 13 different species of otter, but the one we get in Ireland is the Eurasian Otter and can be found throughout Europe and Asia.



What does it look like?

The Eurasian otter is about the size of a small dog, measuring about 1m in length and weighing about 8kg. It has a long tail and small ears; its eyes are high on its head so that it can see above the surface of the water when swimming. It has brown fur with a creamy white under-side. Otters have long sensitive whiskers which allow them to sense their prey, and webbed claws which make it easier to swim.



Where does it live?

Otters live by rivers and lakes, and sometimes near the coast. They rest in a den on the riverbank which is called a “holt”, this is usually a natural space under the roots of a tree, or the

abandoned burrow of some other animal. Otters usually live on their own except when their cubs are born; female otters give birth to 2 or 3 cubs usually in spring or autumn, these cubs will stay with their mother for about a year.

What does it eat?

Otters spend a lot of their time swimming looking for their favourite foods like salmon and trout, as well as lamprey, eels, shellfish like crabs and Crayfish (freshwater lobsters) and frogs. Although otters hunt in the water they must breath air and can only hold their breath under water for about 30 seconds. Otters are usually nocturnal, which means they are active at night and sleep during the day, the best times to see otters are at dawn and dusk.



Otter-spotting:

Next time you're at a river, canal or lakeside, check the muddy bank for otter paw-prints. Otters have 5 toes on their feet, but dogs only have 4, so you can quickly tell them apart!



Fact: Otters have been around for about 30 million years!

Threats:

The main threats to otters are traffic (getting hit by a car!), river pollution, disturbance and habitat loss.

Links:

Find out more about otters at: www.otter.org or <https://www.vincentwildlife.ie/species/otter>

Check out this video by RTE Wild Cities about otters in Galway:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HBwtJO_oMuE

You can watch a live web-cam of an otter's holt:

<https://www.otter.org/Public/OtterCam1.aspx>

Otters are very vocal, and whistle to each other. Listen to otters here:

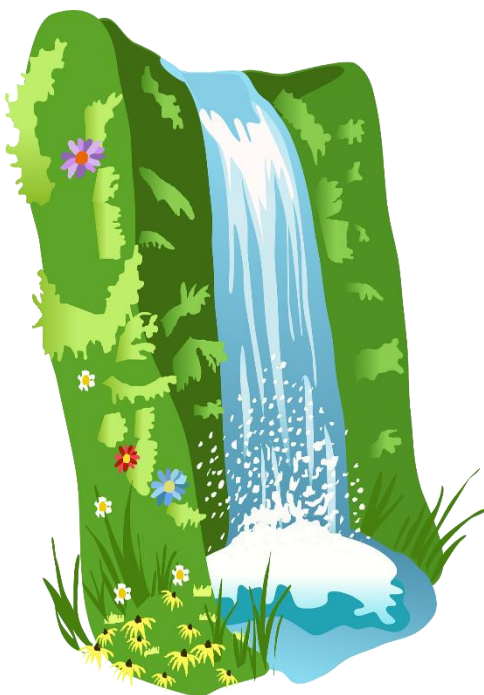
https://www.otter.org/Public/AboutOtters_OtterSpecies.aspx?speciesID=1

Become an otter expert! <http://www.ukwildottertrust.org/educational-materials/>

Your Turn!

You can make your own otter puppet with just a brown paper bag, some paper, colours, glue and googly eyes! Click the link to the International Otter Survival Fund for instructions:

<https://www.otter.org/documents/childrensResources/Otter%20Puppet.jpg>



Quick Quiz:

- Name one thing an otter eats.
- What is the otter's den called?
- How long do otter cubs stay with their mother?
- Otters, badgers and stoats all belong to what group?
- How many types of otter are there in the world?

If you're stuck for an answer, read back over the fact sheet!