



Otter News No. 138, January 2023

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Avian Flu Found in Otters

I'm sure many of you are aware of avian flu which has had such a devastating effect on wild birds and is causing such concern amongst poultry farmers. The World Organisation for Animal Health estimates that



Gannets off the south east coast of Scotland
Photo by Kristin Snippe on Unsplash

more than 50,000 wild birds have already died and 140 million poultry have had to be killed since October 2021.

However, now it has crossed into mammals including seals, foxes and otters. In the Caspian Sea more than 700 seals were found dead in a mass event in December. This occurred near to where the highly contagious H5N1 variant of avian flu had been found in wild birds but scientists don't know if the animals died of it or if they passed it on to each other.

To date there have been four cases in otters reported in Scotland, including one from Skye. The Skye one was found on a beach among many dead seabirds which instantly rang alarm bells. Tests proved positive but again we don't know if the virus was the cause of death or if it was just carrying it possibly without clinical signs of disease.

The Scottish Rural College (SRUC) and Cardiff University Otter Project (CUOP) are carrying out tests at present through the Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA) and updating us when they can. Planning is in progress for all future testing and we will pass the information on when we get it.

DEFRA has now issued some general guidelines about any possible risks to human health and also on the infection in mammals (https://mcusercontent.com/f0812ac7f78686cf7f601ae4d/files/a50b9dbe-fbc0-22a1-7952-b7ec15631f7f/CUOP_update_re_high_pathology_avian_flu_in_mammals.pdf). From this and other sources, CUOP have shared the following key points:

Exposure: *It is probable that the infections identified in UK mammals so far have arisen via scavenging (eating wild birds which have died from avian flu). However - the virus evidently survives well in water too - transmission between birds is often via e.g. duck poo in water, which is likely to increase risk to aquatic/semi-aquatic mammals. There is therefore risk from:*

- Contact with water contaminated with faeces from infected animals.
- Contact with bodily fluids/faeces from infected animals.
- Consumption of infected carcasses.
- Inhalation of virus (i.e. in close contact with a live infected animal).

Prevalence in mammals is currently unknown but 13 cases have been identified by APHA as at 3 February. These were in foxes, seals and otters, and all originated with testing of individuals that died in areas of known bird flu outbreaks, where they have possibly been scavenging on dead wildfowl. There is no data describing prevalence in randomly sampled mammals from the wider wild populations. We have now established a



screening system for otters found dead (largely as a result of roadkill) from across England/Wales/Scotland, to enable us to evaluate prevalence within the wild population. So far (as at 27/01/2023) we have received results on 48 samples (from across England/Wales/Scotland) all of which have tested negative.

Risk: Genomic evidence shows an adaptive marker present in infected mammals which is associated with increased virulence and replication in mammals. There is evidence of disease (particularly meningoencephalitis) and mortality in infected mammals including seals, otters and foxes. However, there is currently insufficient data on infected mammals (including humans) to evaluate population level risk.

There is a risk of the virus becoming transmissible from wild mammals to humans and so everyone should be cautious if they come across a sick or dead animal. As yet there don't seem to be any official guidelines from DEFRA about the handling of otters by rescue centres or anyone else who may handle a carcass. However everyone should be very careful and wear PPE in these circumstances and if they develop flu-like symptoms they should contact a doctor and be tested for avian flu.

We don't want to bring about panic but would advise any member of the public to be cautious around any dead wild animal or bird and report it to the appropriate authorities. In the case of otters, they can contact us by email (enquiries@otter.org) or phone 01471 822 487.



Water Problems Continue

Following on from our article in last month's e-update on **"ENGLAND'S TARGET FOR CLEANING WATERWAYS DELAYED A BIT!"**, it seems as if the problem is being intensified by low levels of groundwater across Europe. This has been known for a while and extreme dry summer weather has not helped the levels to recover since 2018, and 2022 appears to have been particularly bad (except here on Skye!!).

These droughts clearly have a huge impact on aquatic and semi-aquatic species, like the otter, through the damage to natural habitats as water is taken for human purposes such as agriculture and power generation.

Scientists from various organisations have used data from space to assess the extent of the problem. Following analysis of the results Torsten Mayer-Gürr and Andreas Kvas from the Institute of Geodesy at Graz, Austria, said *"A few years ago, I would never have imagined that water would be a problem here in Europe, especially in Germany or Austria. We are actually getting problems with the water supply here -- we have to think about this,"* <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2023/01/230125104007.htm>

Then we have to ask if the situation is so serious for water in Germany and Austria why are they still continuing to push for otter culls?

And going back to the issue of pollution, Thames Water has come under a lot of fire for pumping raw sewage into the waterways. In fact, they were named as one of the worst 12 suppliers in the UK. Over four years the company had to pay £32 million in fines and in 2022 they received a fine of £4 million for releasing 500,000 litres of raw sewage into the river at Oxford which killed at least 3000 fish.

So, instead of dealing with the actual problem of the sewage pollution, they have decided to bring out an advertising campaign based around an otter called Brian. Their aim is that Brian can become as famous as the Compare The Market meerkats, thus deflecting public opinion from the real problem – the filth in the waterways.



Feargal Sharkey, former lead singer of The Undertones, has campaigned for many years about water pollution and he said "The question is, what is an otter's rate of survival when swimming through sewage?"

In response Thames Water said: "We have an advertising campaign in development which aims to respond to questions we are asked by customers and to address their concerns." We asked Thames Water for permission to use an image of Brian the Otter but they refused this. So we will have to leave it to you to go to the following link to make up your own mind. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-11688361/Brian-otter-Sorry-Thames-Water-compare-meerkat-fire-firm-films-advert.html>

News from The Sanctuary

The main news this month concerns Dòbhran, who has shown himself to be an incredibly strong and determined animal. He has escaped from his sleeping box three times now but fortunately that just lets him into the building so he can't actually get out. The first time he took off a part of the side of his box! The second time he took off a part of the other side!! And after his latest escape, we found that he had lifted the heavy lid on the box and squeezed out!!! That is some feat as the lid is high above the base of the box so he must have stood on his hind legs and pushed up! We think that he has secretly been doing push-ups to get so strong!

We have used this box for many otters before and never had this problem. Someone did suggest we rename him "Houdini" – a good idea.



Dòbhran (aka Houdini)

Fortunately the other otters have all been behaving themselves. Baird and Marina are now pretty big so we are starting the process of looking for a release site for them.



Bealltinn – enjoying the couch she has fashioned in her pen

Bealltinn was not impressed the other day when we gave her some fresh hay in her bed and took herself off to her favourite sunbathing corner until we backed off.

If you would like to support our cubs in the Sanctuary you can send a cheque marked "Hospital" on the back or make a donation online at www.ottershop.co.uk

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Otter Shop Product of the Month

www.ottershop.co.uk

Valentine's Day... coming soon!

We have a few ideas for you at the Otter Shop, why not click through and take a peek
<https://ottershop.co.uk/search?q=valentine>



Work on Otters in Tanzania Grows

IOSF firmly believes that education is vital in conservation and so we are delighted that William Mgomo, our African Community Education Officer, has encouraged more people to join him in this outreach work.

This time, Jimmy Chami visited Mindu Village in the Morogoro region for three days and was shown where otters live and observed footprints. He then went to and engaged with 15 community stakeholders, namely fishermen and farmers - sharing knowledge on otters, how they are an indicator of healthy environments, their importance to an ecological balance and how they can also help in economic stability through eco-tourism.



They told him that the otters are mostly nocturnal so as to avoid human presence. The farmers have no problems with them but, understandably, the fishermen have had issues when the otters have destroyed nets to get at the fish.

Jimmy stated that he enjoyed working with these people as it is important to understand their views of otters and any conflict that has arisen. He can then take time to explain why they are so important and therefore, hopefully, produce stewards for the otters' conservation. He believes that spreading this project across more regions will help otters in the long term.

He also wanted to offer special thanks to William Mgomo and Mrisho Mohamedi, who we introduced you to more recently, for their help and guidance for this project, as well as IOSF for their encouragement in this.

A fantastic project from Jimmy who has done a lot for otters in that region! This three-man team started by William will certainly grow and result in even more education work in Tanzania. Thank you to them all.

Wolf Predation on Sea Otters

In most places, otters are at the top of the food chain and rarely predated upon but this isn't always the case. On one remote Alaskan Island, wolves have turned to eating sea otters due to depleting deer populations. In 2013, a wolf pack swam to the island to hunt the deer there and, despite the decrease in this prey, they did not leave.



Now a study of the wolf population started in 2015, has revealed that the animals have turned to otters. The study analysed DNA in the wolf scat and found that between 2015-2020 the evidence of deer in the scat had dropped from 75% to 7% while otters had increased from 25% to 57%, showing how the wolves have adapted to their changing environment.



IOSF spoke to Angela Doroff, a sea otter expert based in Alaska, and she agreed with the findings and backed



Sea otter

the claims that this sort of observation hadn't been readily available before sea otters recolonised previous habitat. She stated that a study on the Katmai coast, central Alaska, where the National Park Service was examining DNA in wolf scat and evidence from camera traps, found that sea otter, as well as salmon, made up a significant portion of the diet of grey wolves. Some footage showed how the wolves would hunt together and block off the route back to the sea for the otter.

Unlike other species of otter, sea otters are not as well suited to moving around on land and can become particularly vulnerable to predation from species such as wolves and

bears. Sea otters do have other predators that they need to be wary of, including white sharks, orca and bald eagles (but only the young otters in the case of the latter).

Although we do love otters – this is nature and every species has to survive!

<https://www.livescience.com/wolves-hunting-sea-otters-in-alaska>

Update of Singapore Otters

After the sad news that the Bishan mum had died, we were sent some lovely photos taken on 12 January of the Zouk family. The mother of this family is actually the daughter of the Bishan mum and she dispersed to start her own family about three years ago.

Thanks to Otter City for permission to use these photos.



Thank You...

to everyone who has kindly donated. We realise that these are difficult times for so many and appreciate your continued support.

Our thanks also go to Les Amis de la Route Du Pal, Big Wild Thought and Bartlett Taylor Charitable Trust.

And to our Corporate Sponsors: Andrew Poppett Enterprises Ltd, Nurtured by Nature, holidaycottages.co.uk.

We can't do it without you.





Meet Lana Bovaird (image right), aged 7, from London, UK! Lana is an otter-holic and saved up her pocket money to purchase her otter adoption with IOSF. Lana adopted Marina and took her time to pick the charity she thought was best and eventually chose IOSF.



Lana, thank you so much for caring so much for otters, with kids like you, their future is in safe hands!



And don't forget to enter our **great art competition**. It is open to anyone 16 and under from anywhere in the world!

You have until **10 March** to get your wonderful creations in. Winners will be announced the week commencing 13 March and will receive an exciting surprise prize!

Simply email ben@otter.org with your name, age and the picture(s) you want to enter!

For more information on Team Otter, check out our website (www.loveotters.org) or Facebook. If you are interested in forming your own Team Otter Club contact Ben@otter.org

Grace Onions

We were extremely sorry to hear that Grace Onions, a loyal supporter of IOSF since 2002, died in September last year.



Grace lived in Croydon and joined in IOSF World Otter Day with children's activities like fish-themed picnics and walks along their local river. In 2011 she walked 6 km with 18 children and six parents and Grace told us afterwards "It was a lovely afternoon and not one of the little 'otters' moaned about being tired. We went to our local river – the Wandle – and paddled around for a while. Some of them remembered to be otters in the river but luckily I managed to get them all to stay mostly dry."

Grace loved otters and one of the last things she did before she became too ill to leave the house was to visit the British Wildlife Centre in Lingfield to see the otters there. Her husband told us "We spent a lovely half an hour or so watching them frolic around."

Unfortunately we never met Grace herself but we are so grateful for her support of all our work. Our sympathies go to her husband, Amaraghosha, her family and friends.

Events

- **Ben Yoxon will present a talk to the Mull Otter Group following their AGM on Sunday 5th March at Craignure Hall.** He will be talking about IOSF's work with a focus on rehab.
- **IOSF's Paul Yoxon will be presenting a talk "Otter Ecology and Conservation" for the Assynt Field Club** <https://www.assyntwildlife.org.uk/event/otters-ecology-and-conservation-with-dr-paul-yoxon/>

This will take place at Lochinver Village Hall, Lochinver, Sutherland, Scotland on Thursday 6th April 2023 at 7.30pm. Adults £3 and refreshments are available after the talk. If you are in the area, why not pop along and enjoy this otterly interesting event.



- World Otter Day 31st May 2023 https://www.otter.org/Public/Events_OurCurrentEvent.aspx
- **Ross Lawford – BBC Winterwatch - Episode 4**
We mentioned last month about the great photos and videos taken by Ross Lawford on the Water of Leith in Edinburgh. Those of you who follow the BBC series Winterwatch will have seen some of his work in Episode 4. The programme looked at how Nature helped Ross in his personal life and he said “*It was like nature took my hand*”. What a wonderful statement and we hope that Nature will also take the hand of others who are needing help.

For those of you who missed it you can catch up on iPlayer and the piece is about 9 minutes into the programme.

CORPORATE MEMBERSHIP - WHETHER YOU OWN A BUSINESS OR ARE EMPLOYED, does the company have a green policy/ support conservation? Then perhaps the company would like to consider becoming a Corporate Member with IOSF and supporting our work with otters.

You can find out more information on our website http://otter.org/Public/HelpUs_CorporateSponsorship.aspx

Photo of The Month



We see a lot of pictures of otters from all over the world – and they are all amazing. This one, however, is unique, as underwater shots are rare! This photo is of a young female otter fishing on a tidal stretch of river in Aberdeenshire.

The photographer, Andy Coventry, shared this insight into the otter “*She was rejected by her mum early on but knew enough to survive, often catching eels which she would release, chase and catch again. She would sometimes blow bubbles from her nose while hunting under water and again while surfacing.*”

If you would like to submit a photo for our Photo of the Month please send it to Ben@otter.org together with the credit for the photographer

News in Brief

Long Island mammal survey

For the first time in over 50 years, a full survey of the mammals that reside on Long Island is to be carried out. Such an extensive wildlife survey of the area has not been completed since the 1960s and much has changed since then. Still reeling from the impact of extensive habitat destruction, and trapping, species such as North American river otter, black bears and beavers and other species have struggled too.



Seatuck Environmental Association will start a three-year survey to find 27 land and semi-aquatic mammals on their "look-for" list, which includes river otters. Seaturks are appealing to locals to help document wildlife through the iNaturalist App and help find the animals in question.

<https://www.wshu.org/long-island-news/2023-01-30/volunteers-will-assist-biologists-in-a-survey-of-long-island-mammals>

California bans furs

Although California banned trapping, including the trapping of otters, some time ago, this is a major victory for animals. From 1 January 2023, California has put a state wide ban on the sale of any new animal fur products. The law makes it illegal to manufacture or sell a new animal fur product in California (including online sales) and will hopefully see a marked reduction in the demand for furs. California accounts for 25% of the fur sales across the US so we are likely to see a large "dent" in the US fur industry.

The fur industry is cruel and barbaric with methods beyond belief. We will spare you the details but this is a major step in the right direction. Israel was the first country to become "fur-free" and there are now major calls from European nations to follow suit. Most well-known brands have stopped using furs and we hope that California's new stance can be the catalyst for more states to follow suit.

https://blog.humanesociety.org/2023/01/in-a-win-for-animals-californias-ban-on-fur-officially-takes-effect.html?credit=blog_post_010323_id13265



North American river otter ©Karen James

Wolf scientists get great footage of otters

To quote Voyageurs Wolf Project "*Now that's a lot of otters!*" and they are right!

They put up a camera from June to September 2022 hoping to get good footage of wolves moving around the edge of a beaver pond but that didn't pan out. Instead they did get a lot of otter footage and also a bear and her three cubs. On two occasions the bears knocked over the camera so after the second time they removed the camera!

Although obviously disappointed not to get the footage they were hoping for, they were still excited to see the other species in the area.

<https://www.facebook.com/VoyageursWolfProject/>

Otter v Cobra

Something we all know is if you see a cobra, with its "hood-up" you stay clear. Unfortunately, these smooth-coated otters in Singapore didn't receive that memo. The video shows how the otters approach the cobra before quickly becoming bored and disappearing again. It is believed that the otters weren't threatened nor threatening the snake, but merely wanted to check it out.

Both animals will surely have benefitted from the fact that nothing worse happened!

<https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2023/01/31/otters-face-off-cobra-singapore-park/11154101002/>

Otters in German biosphere reserve

We are grateful to our friend Wolfgang Gettmann who sent us the link for this article.

According to the Nature Conservation Union, the otter is one of the rarest animals in Germany and it was believed to have disappeared completely from Saarland. But now it has been found in the Bliesgau biosphere reserve where they had been working on habitat restoration for many years. The otter was



Eurasian otter ©Derek Crawley



found in the River Mastau in Homburg, which lies between Beeden and Schwarzenbach, but it is not known exactly how it came to be there.

Wolfgang, who is himself from Saarland, said “Nice that the otter has found a habitat again in my old home.”

Of course we hope there will be many more such records, but again it begs the question “WHY CULL?”.

https://www.sr.de/sr/home/nachrichten/regionalnachrichten/regionalnachrichten272160.html&t=Fischotter+im+Bliesgau+ang esiedelt?fbclid=IwAR2Vkbgh6Oo5eOYiPdfFKEWsm57B6ZZ9Z_K6RzfRZlacK4g3KE8TySfk7HM

Otter filmed swimming in village duck pond

Local people were delighted to see video of an otter in the duck pond of Finchingfield village in Essex, which is one of the most photographed villages in England.

Essex Highways say that the bridge over the duck pond is in poor condition and needs to be demolished and rebuilt. However, village residents are campaigning against this and hope that the presence of the otter could delay the work.

<https://www.essexlive.news/whats-on/whats-on-news/otter-spotted-swimming-beautiful-essex-8109413>

Don't believe all you read!

Recently there was an article about the discovery of giant otters in a new location. Exciting we thought until we actually read it. The headline read “**Telangana: Rare and endangered giant river otters sighted in Mancherial**” and it went on “*Rare and endangered giant river otters (Pteronura brasiliensis) were sighted in the waters of the Godavari River near Kalamadugu village in Jannaram mandal.*” This is in India!

The article even claimed to have photographic proof but of course these weren't giant otters at all. They were smooth-coated otters which of course are present in India. We contacted the author pointing out that giant otters are confined to South America and he was very apologetic about the error. He is now looking into producing an article on otters (the real ones) in that area and IOSF is helping with information for this.

<https://telanganatoday.com/telangana-rare-and-endangered-giant-river-otters-sighted-in-mancherial>



Giant river otters (*Pteronura brasiliensis*)

All photos are © to the name/s as indicated, otherwise ©IOSF

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For a one-off payment of £350 you can become a Life Supporter and give your long-term commitment to help secure a better future for otters in the UK and around the world.

We will send you a certificate showing your life supporter status and you will continue to receive full updates in our newsletters, on all of the work that we are doing.

<https://www.ottershop.co.uk/become-a-life-supporter-c2x9466694>

A LEGACY IS A GREAT WAY OF GIVING TO SOMETHING CLOSE TO YOUR HEART and every gift makes a difference. After your family, have you ever thought of leaving something in your will to charity? Please consider remembering the International Otter Survival Fund in your will and help our work, protecting otters, to continue.

Including a legacy in your will ensures that your wishes are carried out, so it is important to discuss this with your solicitor. You can stipulate a specific restriction for its use, but remember that without restriction your legacy can be directed to where it is required most urgently.

Should you choose to provide a legacy for the International Otter Survival Fund in your will, we thank you and appreciate your support in this way.

This link http://otter.org/Public/HelpUs_Legacy.aspx will take you to our dedicated web page concerning making a Legacy.

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<https://giveacar.co.uk/charities/international-otter-survival-fund/>

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Discover Ways You Can Help

There are many ways in which you can raise money and awareness to help the otters in our **Fundraising Pack** or find out what some of our supporters have done over the years in the online **newsletters**.

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