

## Press release

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# Spotted an otter lately? The National Parks and Wildlife Service wants to know

From [Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage \(/en/organisation/departments/housing-local-government-and-heritage/\)](/en/organisation/departments/housing-local-government-and-heritage/).

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If you have seen an otter recently, or signs of their presence, the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) want to know about it.

The NPWS is launching a new National Otter Survey and has teamed up with researchers in Queen's University Belfast and the National Biodiversity Data Centre to collect and collate otter records from right across the country. The new survey will map otters and compare results to the last survey, carried out in 2010-11. NPWS teams will be looking for characteristic signs of otters at over 900 sites throughout the country, including rivers, lakes and the coast. Members of the public are asked to keep their eyes peeled for otters and to get involved in this national survey by adding their sightings to the survey results.

Minister of State for Heritage and Electoral Reform Malcolm Noonan said:

“While NPWS teams will be out conducting fieldwork research, people can play their part in giving us a complete picture of otter numbers in the country so we want as much public participation as possible on this. The public plays an important role in research such as this that ultimately helps us to develop the evidence to inform policy. Otters can be hard to find and mainly forage at night so keep your eyes peeled if you’re visiting a coastal, river or lake environment in the evening or night time and make sure to let us know if you’ve seen one.”

Dr Ferdia Marnell, Mammal Specialist with the NPWS, emphasised:

“The otter is one of Ireland’s most elusive animals so getting as many people involved in the survey as possible will be important if we are to get good coverage. Otters are rarely seen, so instead, over the coming months, NPWS staff will be searching for otter tracks and signs.”

He added:

“Otters have large, webbed feet and leave distinctive footprints, but these can be hard to find. Fortunately, otters mark their territory using droppings known as ‘spraints’. Otters deposit spraints conspicuously on boulders along riverbanks, logs on lake shores or the rocky high tide line. Spraints can be up to 10 cm or 3 inches long, black through to white but commonly brown, tarry to powdery in consistency and straight or curved making them tricky to identify. Luckily, they commonly contain fish bones and crayfish shells which are the otters favoured diet making them easy to tell apart from the droppings of birds and other mammals.”

Otters are mostly active at night and most typically seen at dawn or dusk. They may be spotted from bridges swimming in rivers or along the rocky seashore. Otters are brown, about 80 cm (30 inches) long and can be seen gliding along the water surface before diving to show their distinctive long pointed tail which is almost as long again as their body.

The otter and its habitat are protected under the EU Habitats Directive which requires that Ireland reports on the status of the species every six years. The next report is due in 2025.

The otter suffered significant declines across the UK and much of continental Europe during the 1970s, '80s and '90s but remained widespread in Ireland. The most recent Irish survey (2010-2011) found signs of otter from all counties of Ireland and from sea-shore to mountain streams. The otter hunts in water, but spends much of its time on land, and as a result is vulnerable to river corridor management such as culverting, dredging and the clearance of bankside vegetation, as well as pollution, pesticides, oil spillages, coastal developments and road traffic.

Members of the public can learn more about otters and submit recordings of otter sightings at the National Biodiversity Data Centre's dedicated webpage:

<https://biodiversityireland.ie/surveys/national-otter-survey/>  
(<https://biodiversityireland.ie/surveys/national-otter-survey/>).

Combining the national survey data with as many records from the public as possible will help fill in any gaps in the map allowing the otter's range to be fully assessed.

The final report on how the otter is faring will be published in 2025.

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## Notes

The national otter survey is funded by NPWS and is being coordinated by Dr Neil Reid, a conservation biologist at Queen's University Belfast working with the National Biodiversity Data Centre. Giorria Environmental Services, Mayo are supporting the survey logistics. The Atlantic Technological University, Galway will also be testing river water samples for otter DNA to see if this is a feasible way to survey their presence with greater certainty.

National Biodiversity Data Centre's national otter survey project webpage:

<https://biodiversityireland.ie/surveys/national-otter-survey/>  
(<https://biodiversityireland.ie/surveys/national-otter-survey/>).

For the last national otter survey report from 2010-11 go to:

<https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/fe6b3-spotted-an-otter-lately-the-national-parks-and-wildlife-service-wants-to-know/>

For the last national otter survey report from 2010-11 go to:

<https://www.npws.ie/sites/default/files/publications/pdf/IWM76.pdf>

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