

# Otter Predation and The Effect It Has On Angling



*In this issue of Carp-Trade we've teamed up with Shane Always, who has a degree in Fisheries Management and Aquatics and is the owner of Velocity Angling. Here he gives us an insight into otters and the havoc they are causing around the UK's fisheries, and how fishery owners or managers can keep them at bay and protect their livelihoods.*

Otters (*Lutra lutra*), for those who are not aware, are members of the weasel family. There are 13 species throughout the world, including the Northern River otter, Sea otter, Eurasian otter, and the Giant otter.

Our native otters generally live near rivers, lakes, swamps and coastal regions. The north of the UK is a stronghold of residency; they make burrows near the water's edge, and are equally at home on land as they are in the water. As we all know, Otters thrive on fish but also eat other food sources, such as crayfish, turtles, crabs and rabbits, to name just a few. Because of their high metabolism and lack of blubber, an otter needs to eat around 25 per cent of its own body weight in food each day. River otters may have up to six pups, and an average lifespan of between 9-15 years. March and April are the usual times for otter pups and this is when the otters teach their pups basic survival skills and how to hunt for their food, and because of this carcasses can often be seen on the bankside, hardly eaten. River otters are very playful and can be seen sliding down muddy slopes or frolicking in the water, so anglers can see trails around fisheries that have an otter threat. Otters can also hold their breath underwater for up to eight minutes, which means they may be seen in one area by the general anglers/owners and then they disappear to come up in an area with no threat.

## The Threat

Although the otter population is on the rise at present, with over 1,500 of them resident in the UK, one concern I have is the rising water levels and winter floods we've had over the last couple of years, which have severely harmed the slow but steady recovery of Britain's otter population. These conditions have forced the animals out of their river homes and on to roads, where they have become road kill; in some areas, as many as one-quarter of the otters have died, while many young otters have drowned in their dens (holts). Despite being accomplished swimmers, otters struggle in raging torrents, and have problems catching fish in swollen and murky rivers, therefore forcing them to widen their search for food. This is one reason why I feel stillwater fishery owners are at threat and are becoming the main source of food for otters.

A few months ago my local newspaper reported that the West Country's threatened otter population is on the road to recovery, according to a conservation

charity. The People's Trust for Endangered Species published an annual survey recording the public's observation of mammals in the urban environment. It found that improved water quality and fish stocks were underpinning an increase in sightings of otters in towns and cities in every English county. The otter population, traditionally strong and internationally important in the West Country, had dropped considerably in recent decades because of pollution and hunting. This, to me as the owner of a fishery, is very worrying because otters are a beautiful creature but are an angler's and fishery owner's worst nightmare; they are on the increase nationwide through reintroduction, but this is starting to have a massive impact on our local rivers and stillwaters. Over the last couple of years we have heard more often about fisheries being wiped out through otter attacks, and in my own opinion I feel this will be a threat like any disease such as KHV and SVC that can be caused through both illegal and legal fish movement. If there is no control on the reintroduction of otters and we are actually seeing them in the towns and cities, as well as the countryside, then I feel figures are higher than suggested, with the mammals seemingly not having a care in the world about human pressure. As a general rule, if an otter visited your fishery on a daily basis, you could, in fact, be wiped out

in as little as 3 months. If they have young to tend to and train for survival, there will be the obvious signs of trails/slides in and out of the water on the bank margins, dug outs under the banks, and cyprinids (nine times out of ten a carp) dead and ripped open on the bank. As a fishery manager or owner, general anglers who are on and around the banks 24 hours a day, 7 days a week will make you aware of any sightings.

## The Signs

The obvious signs of an otter attack on fish are large open wounds between the pectoral fins, razor blade cuts along both flanks, and facial damage (particularly to the top of the mouth). All these signs show where the otter has been rolling and climbing the carp's flanks then gripping the mouth to pull the carp onto the bank (hence the mouth damage). When the fish are finally in position on the bank, the otter normally only eats the liver – this is why there are large open wounds on the belly. The remainder of the carcass is then left to rot or be eaten by other general wildlife such as rats and foxes. Another telltale sign that there are otters present is finding eels on the bank with just the heads missing.

On many occasions the otters will 'play with fish', and as I mentioned earlier, this is when the fishery has a major problem. The otters are teaching their young how to hunt and survive, going through the motions of killing; this is when real problems occur and your livelihood as a fishery owner is at a high risk of being wiped out overnight, as they are now killing for fun rather than for survival purposes.

## Fencing and Costs

The cost for otter fencing seems to be rising in price, and it won't necessarily stop otters entering through holes and weak points. This is a major concern for most fisheries countrywide, due to the fact that on average most quotes are around £1,800 per 100 metres; this cost is for most fisheries just unaffordable, but at the same time it's a job that should be at the top of every fishery's list that currently has no form of protection against otters. The main problem is that a fishery could hold stock worth over £200k on the current market value, but it doesn't have the finances to protect its livelihood. If, as a fishery, you could never afford to fence off the complex, one idea would be to go through all the EA requirements and have a commercial netting agency come to the lakes and



The gruesome remains you could come face to face with.

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Otter fencing being erected around a new water.



remove and sell some of the stock to help cover the costs of fencing. In my eyes it's better to sell £20k in fish and protect the remainder of the stock with fencing rather than run the risk of thinking it'll never happen to you. The day might come when otters arrive on the scene and you lose most or all of your stock and still have no protection, and let's be fair, if you don't have any fish in your lakes then you don't have a fishery or income – full stop.

#### How To Cut Back on Possible Otter Introduction

As we all know, the main way of potentially stopping otters getting into a fishery is by installing otter-proof fencing. Over the last 5 years of owning my lakes at Velocity Angling, as yet we've had no otters visit the lakes on the complex to cause an attack (touch wood). Although we haven't had any problems, fencing is going to be installed this coming winter to cut back on a possible attack in the future (due to the rise in fisheries being attacked by otters) – it's better to be safe than sorry.

There are three reasons why I think otter attacks at Velocity Angling have been kept down, and believe me, the Avalon levels do have otters present; other fisheries local to Velocity have seen otters, some lakes have unfortunately had casualties and losses over the years. On the Velocity Angling site at present we have a pair of resident mink, which have been there for as long as I have owned the venue. To a certain degree I feel this has helped cut back on otter threats; the mink are active around the complex and leave their scent everywhere, and some would disagree with this, but I do feel mink would attack otters if threatened by them, as they are very territorial mammals.

I believe dog scent is another major positive, so if you do own a fishery and are concerned about a possible attack, it would be a positive move to allow dogs (on occasions) to walk and wander around the lakes, as long as they aren't a nuisance to the anglers. I often let my dogs have a free roam around the complex and let them mark their territory to help warn off any otters thinking of coming onto the complex.

Human pressure and presence on a daily basis is a must! I have noticed that lakes that have had attacks are very quiet around the banks, especially on weekdays

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when nobody is there at all (and maybe even on the odd weekend). Due to this the otters don't feel any threat and are able to come and go as they please. In the highlands otters can be seen playing and feeding on a daily basis because they don't feel any threat whatsoever from humans, but otters that live in and around the English countryside seem more aware and shy of humans. The first sighting would normally be from an angler fishing on a Friday evening, seeing a carp on the bank after being feasted on by other wildlife after the otters have had their fill. This would tell me that the carp had been there for a few days, which would mean the attack was carried out in the week when the area was pretty quiet.

In reality, fishing clubs could protect their fisheries from otters for less than £1,000. That's the message from an enterprising group of anglers who managed to shut out the predators for good with a DIY fencing solution, which cost a fraction of the amount being quoted from fencing companies. A group of anglers simply got together to help with the work and installed a three-wire electric fence around the lake. This is a fishery that in the past has lost carp of 28lb to otters, but in the three years since putting up their DIY fence, they haven't lost one. It might not be a solution for everyone but it certainly worked for them.

Last year the Environment Agency earmarked just £100,000 to provide the highest risk public waters with grants to help cover fencing costs; this is only for club-run waters, so if you are a private or commercial fishery you won't be able to get any grants. To put it in perspective though, at the price of £1,800 per 100 metres quoted,

this would mean the EA would fund just 5,555 metres of fencing throughout the UK! So what's the boundary perimeter of your fishery? That's not much of a grant to say it's for the whole of the UK.

But if you are a club-run water then do make sure you pester the local EA Technical Officers for grants because they may be able to cover some of your fees.

What the sport needs is for the Agency to formalise a national application process for otter fencing grants, and unless they find substantially more funding, they risk failing in their statutory duty to protect fish stocks, therefore leaving anglers vulnerable to the government-sponsored predators. For the commercial fisheries I really do feel we also need the support from the governing body (EA) as well as the Angling Trust to push for otter fencing grants to protect our stocks. As an owner myself, I have no problem with the release and reintroduction of otters into the wilds of the countryside, but there has to be a balance. There should also be an interest in our much-loved sport and livelihood, and protection and support from the agents that have funding, which most fisheries don't have.

These are only my views, concerns and expressions on what I have heard, seen, read and been told in my time of fishery management, and from being a carp angler for over 20 years on both local waters and fisheries around the country. I just hope that what I have written will help in some way, shape or form to protect and preserve the non-ornamental species that reside in our rivers and stillwaters around the UK for years to come. 