

Watching Otters in The Highlands

The 26th May was world Otter day and to celebrate we gave an online talk about how to find and watch otters in The Highlands. For those who couldn't make it below are a few tips for otter watching in the North of Scotland.



Head to the coast

We only have one species of Otter in the UK and that is the Eurasian Otter *Lutra lutra*, however our otters can be split in to two very different hunting styles. We have the traditional freshwater otters that hunt in lochs and rivers and are mainly active in the early morning or late evening. Then we have otters that hunt by the coast and are dependent on the tides in order to hunt, so may be seen at any time of day. The west coast of Scotland and the Islands also have

a much higher population of otters than in the rest of the UK. Therefore, to give yourself the best chance of seeing otters in the Highlands you are best to focus on the coast.

Check rocky shorelines

Not any old stretch of coastline will do if you're an otter though. Stop and scan around sheltered rocky stretches of coastline with lots of seaweed. When the tide is in this is where the fish that the otters are hunting will be hiding. Check any rocky outcrops amongst the water and kelp as otters will quite often haul out to feed and young may wait and play there while their mother hunts. If there is nothing on the rocks look for an animal that is low in the water with a long body and a v-shaped wake. Although this may be harder to see if it's not a calm day.

Check the tides

An incoming or outgoing tide is the best time to find otters hunting. They are land mammals so can't spend a long time under water before coming up for a breath. This means that an extremely high tide might mean the water is too deep for them to successfully hunt their bottom dwelling prey. Conversely at low tide their prey will be out in deeper water and too hard to catch. This may vary a little bit depending on the topography of the coastline, in some areas there are shelves of rock that maintain a nice depth of water for otters to hunt in most of the time. It may be worth learning more about the structure of the coastline you are visiting in order to increase your chances of finding the best spot.



Be patient and keep a low profile

Of course, you may be lucky and see an otter instantly but more likely you will need to stop often and wait for a while before one bounds in to view. Stay as still and as quiet as you can because otters have quite good vision and a very good sense of smell on land. If you're upwind of them, they

will be able to smell you and will likely get spooked. There are some individuals that don't seem to mind the presence of humans, but many are still very wary of humans and will disappear at the first hint of your presence. It's important that we don't disturb these charismatic and playful creatures so that we can enjoy them behaving completely naturally in their environment.

Happy Otter watching!

Marcia Rae

High Life Highland Ranger for Easter Ross

Resources

Pictures by Scott O'Hara

Otters by Paul Chanin

British Mammal Society website <https://www.mammal.org.uk/species-hub/full-species-hub/discover-mammals/species-otter/>

Trees for life website <https://treesforlife.org.uk/into-the-forest/trees-plants-animals/mammals/otter/>

Nature Scot <https://www.nature.scot/plants-animals-and-fungi/mammals/land-mammals/otter>