

Otterly endearing

Polly Pullar looks at the amazing work that the Scottish SPCA are doing to ensure Scotland's otter population continues to go from strength-to-strength

Currently the otter, a member of the mustelid family, appears to be thriving in Scottish waters. However our memories are short as through the 1950-1970s, due to the increased use of toxic agricultural chemicals leaching into the food chain, it had largely disappeared from most rivers, and only thrived in coastal strongholds in parts of northwest Scotland.

The otter had been legally hunted with hounds for centuries due to its perceived threat to fish, and also for its fur. It was not until intense lobbying and heated battles between hunt supporters and campaigners came to a head that a ban was brought into effect in 1978. Hunts were privately owned and had

numerous followers from all walks of life. These included ministers, a fact that was heavily criticised as it appeared that they condoned the serious cruelty of the hunt. The otter was hunted for hours before being pulled away from hounds whilst in its death throes and held up by the huntsman in a ghastly ritual. Once the ban was in place, otter hounds were briefly employed to hunt for the escaped farmed fur-bearer, the non-native North American mink. The presence of this

mustelid has caused insidious mayhem in the natural environment, and continues to pose a threat to ground-nesting birds and rare mammals such as the water vole. Questions were raised as to how hounds would distinguish between an otter and a mink when fired by the chase, and it was reported that numerous otters were still killed in the process.

The publication of Gavin Maxwell's *Ring of Bright Water* in 1960 remains for many naturalists a seminal moment. It is a work of enormous influence and great beauty that inspired an entirely new way of thinking. With its lyrical prose, and extraordinary story, it was also responsible for helping to change attitudes towards the otter. In Scotland, the otter finally came under the protection of the Wildlife and Countryside Act in 1981.

The otter remains one of the finest examples of our changing attitudes, for it has gone from eagerly hunted quarry to one of the best-loved British mammals of all, and there are few people who are not excited by seeing one in the wild. Our rivers have had a drastic clean up too and though we have a long way to go, it has led to an extraordinary

Image: Rescued cubs need a large swimming pool to hone their diving and built up muscle.

recovery in the otter population. Otters are now present in most riparian habitats, including surprisingly the Clyde in the midst of Glasgow.

Since it opened in 2012 the Scottish SPCA's busy National Wildlife Rescue Centre at Fishcross, near Alloa, has received 110 otters, and their dedicated team currently work with a higher number annually than any other rescue centre in the UK. Most of the casualties brought to the centre are cubs, and as centre manager Colin Seddon explains, they have now honed their hand-rearing techniques to a fine art, and have an impressive 85% release success rate for any otters that have survived the first 48 hours following arrival. For all wild mammals and birds this a critical period, a time when many may succumb to shock and stress. Most of the adult otters that are brought in are road casualties, and often tend to be so badly injured that little can be done for them. On occasions dog otters have been involved in fights with one another, and may also be too weak by the time they are found. Cubs however are a very different matter.

They are brought to the centre from far and wide – from southern Scotland to Tiree, Lewis and Aberdeen, from the Borders to the Isle of Mull. Cubs may be born year round, but there appears to be a peak of arrivals at the centre during early winter, particularly following periods of flooding. In the winter of 2016 following catastrophic downpours, the centre received 22 otter cubs. They had probably been washed out of their holts in the savage storms, and had become separated from their

mothers due to swiftly rising spates. The shrill and heart-rending cry of a cub heard on a riverbank is usually a clear sign of severe distress. If the cub is alone then it has no chance of survival. Unlike roe fawns that

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Can you help?

If you have a suitable area and habitat and would be interested in becoming involved with otter release, contact Colin Seddon. Tel: 07921 941328

should usually be left well alone, this is not the case for a lone otter cub. Colin advises that such casualties should be picked up and taken to a wildlife rescue centre as soon as possible. In the wild 60-70% of cubs will not make it through their first winter.

The youngest arrivals are bottle-fed on puppy milk substitute, and where possible two or three cubs of similar age and size are kept together. In the case of single orphans a member of staff will adopt the cub and ensure it has ample opportunity to play and interact until such time as another suitable cub is brought in. However even then, the pen will be

divided off with a mesh screen where the cubs can get used to one another before being finally put together. This minimises the risk of stress and bullying; like humans each cub has a different character. Separation anxiety can initially be a problem, with some of the youngest cubs crying plaintively when the staff member leaves them. Sheelagh McAllister, head of large mammals at Fishcross, has had years of experience with otters. ‘They are like human babies when they are left and so we give them toys or heat pads to comfort them and mustn’t give in when they cry. Once they are warm they will soon settle down and sleep peacefully. We also ensure that all noise is kept to a bare minimum in the corridor beside the cubs’ pens. It is vital they don’t get accustomed to voices. Keeping them away from people as much as possible helps them retain their wildness. We never allow any visitors for this reason.’

Once they are weaned onto trout, roach, mince, day-old chicks and the occasional crab and lamprey, all human contact is kept to a strict minimum. When they are old enough the cubs live together in an extensive grass pen in pairs or trios, with a very large swimming pool of 1.5 metres depth allowing plenty of space to dive and build-up vital muscle over the next twelve months, by which time a safe release site will have been found for them. These pens are remotely monitored to minimise human contact. The suitability of sites involves important survey work beforehand. It must be in prime otter habitat, but preferably with a low otter population. Colin explains, ‘cubs that have been found on the coast are usually returned to a coastal habitat and those found on river systems returned to a river, though it is important to remember that there is no difference between otters found in either habitat. Toys remain important and logs introduced into the pen will be used to play on, whilst apples, carrots and seaweed become equally important toys as well as food.’

To rear a cub from bottle feeding stage to release costs the Scottish SSPCA in the region of £1,000 per animal – without taking into account staff wages, nor the long hours put into hand rearing. Though there are currently an estimated 8,000 otters in Scotland, as an apex predator they remain vulnerable to pollution and changes in the ecosystem, as well as increasing traffic. Use of trail cameras and monitoring at release sites has proved that the work of the Scottish SPCA has a high success rate and that the animals soon adapt to life in the wild. This is valuable work that does indeed make a difference.

THIS PAGE - MARK MEDCALF/SHUTTER-STOCK OPPOSITE PAGE - COLIN SEDDON



Otter rescue - clockwise from top: XXXXXXXXXXXX?



ERIC ESSELLE/SHUTTERSTOCK