

## Looking for otters in Berneray

Berneray is a good place to see otters. You can see them almost anywhere around the coast, but the best places to see them are where there is a lot of brown seaweed. They search amongst the seaweed for fish to eat, so watch the areas close to the shore, around the rocks, reefs and islands. You have to look hard because otters are the same colour as the seaweed.

When there is no wind it is very easy to spot otters, because you see the ripples they make as they move through the water. Be careful not to confuse them with seals, which can be easy to do in certain situations, but otters have much bigger heads and thicker necks.

Otters occasionally come inland to the freshwater lochs, searching for eels to eat, so you may be lucky enough to see one there. But here are a few other suggestions for where to go to look for otters in Berneray:

### South Shore Circular Walk

Start from the car park at the end of the machair road. If you are doing this walk in the morning, head eastwards to the shore of Loch Bhuigh and walk close to the shore to Craakinish Point. Walk slowly along the south shore with the sun behind you to Rubha Bhoisnis. Turn the corner and walk up the West beach looking for otter footprints in the sand. Turn right at the picnic area and return to the car park.

### West Beach

There are often otter footprints in the sand here - and you may be lucky enough to see the animal making them!

### Ferry Terminal to Ardmaree Stores

Walk slowly from the Ferry Terminal round the shore to Ardmaree Stores.

### Youth Hostel to Old School

The point, Ludag Port, is another good place to go at low tide to look for otters

### Seal Viewing Point

This is also an otter viewing point! Look out over Bays Loch, scanning the shore and all the rocks and reefs for otters and seals. There are usually plenty of common seals in the loch, and you will be able to learn their shapes and habits so that you don't confuse them with otters. For example, when otters go down into the water, they always go head down in a duck dive. Seals sometimes do that, but sometimes they just sink below the waves.

## Do you know your otters?

The otters that live in Scotland are Eurasian or common otters. Their Latin name is *Lutra lutra* and their Gaelic name is *beeiste dubh* (pronounced 'bee-ust doo'). Eurasian otters should not be confused with sea otters, 'Enhydra lutra', which do not occur in the UK.

Otters are aquatic predators, so you find them around water, wherever there are plenty of fish for them to catch and eat. They live in underground burrows called holts. As they travel overland they usually follow traditional paths known as otter runs. They are territorial animals and they mark their territory by leaving their droppings, or spraints, in prominent places. You can find sprainting sites beside streams and freshwater lochs, also on the seashore, sometimes in the intertidal zone, on otter runs, outside holts and beside small pools of freshwater close to the sea. The spraints often look like either a green patch on top of a boulder or a very green clump of vegetation.

Otters that spend time in the sea need freshwater, for both drinking and cleaning their fur. They do not have a layer of subcutaneous fat to keep them warm as most animals do. Surprisingly, considering the amount of time they spend in cold water, they rely on their fur to keep them warm. The fur has a dual construction - the outer fur is sleek and waterproof while the inner fur is thick and fluffy, trapping the air that keeps the animal warm. It is therefore vital for the otter's survival that the fur is kept clean and waterproof, so they wash in fresh water and spend a lot of time rubbing and rolling and grooming.

Cubs can be born at any time of the year in the Uists because there is a good supply of food in the sea throughout the year. Male otters take no part in rearing the cubs, in fact they have been known to kill cubs. Usually a female has one or two cubs, sometimes three. The young animals stay with their mother for about a year. During this time they learn to swim and become sufficiently skilled at the difficult task of catching fish so they can lead independent lives.

Females with cubs must be able to find enough food for the whole family and so nearly all the breeding females live beside the sea, occupying territories which contain good feeding areas. Males have larger territories which usually include the territories of two females. It is normally the non-breeding otters and adult males that go to the freshwater lochs.

Otters live for three or four years, and only one or two years as breeding adults. For this reason it is important that otters do not die in accidents.

# The Otters of Berneray

Illustrated natural history guide with map



*Photo: Donald McDiarmid*

Published by Berneray  
Development Group,  
The Nurses' Cottage,  
Isle of Berneray

Text by Jane Twelves