



Otters and mink

Our native otter (*Lutra lutra*) and the smaller non-native American mink (*Mustela vison*) often get confused, but it is easy to tell the difference when you know what to look for.

History

Mink were brought into the UK in the 1920s to be bred for their fur, but over the years some escaped and some were released. The first 'wild' mink were reported in Devon in 1956. They are a real threat to species like our native water vole, but have few predators themselves. Whilst numbers of mink have risen in previous decades, otter numbers declined, particularly in the 1960s and in lowland areas like the Vale of York. This decline was probably due to the build up of pesticides in the otters' prey, habitat pollution and destruction, and persecution - often wrongly - for the mink's actions. Otters often get blamed for taking prey such as game and poultry when mink is the culprit.

In recent years, due to various initiatives to help them, otter numbers have started to recover, particularly in Yorkshire. Both otter and mink are found on many Yorkshire Wildlife Trust nature reserves.



Otter - Credit: Elliott Neep (elliottneep.com)

Telling them apart

Despite both being members of the weasel family, sharing similar habitats and looking broadly similar in shape from a distance, there are differences between the two species.

Appearance

Size: the otter is much bigger and bulkier (95-130cm in length) than the smaller and slimmer mink (42-65cm).

Colour: otters fur is shiny mid/light brown (although looks darker when wet) with a cream chin and neck, and pale belly. Whereas mink have rich, glossy dark brown fur with a white spot on the chin, but is not pale underneath. Its fur looks black when wet.

Head: otters have a large flat head, with small round ears and stiff whiskers – it has been likened to a dog or common seal shape. The mink's head is ferret-like, with a pointed muzzle.

Tail: otters have a long, cylindrical tail which thickens towards the base whereas a mink's tail is much shorter and fluffy.



American mink - Credit WildStock



Feet: otters have large webbed feet with five toes and its tracks reveal distinctive large pads underneath with sometimes only four toes being visible. Whereas mink have much smaller feet, with longer toes/claws, and they are not webbed.

Prey

Otter eat mostly fish but also water birds, frogs and crustaceans like crayfish. It sometimes turns on its back to manipulate prey with its front feet. Mink have a more varied diet, eating fish, water birds, small mammals, game and poultry. Unlike the otter, mink will kill when not hungry.

Droppings

Otters produce tarry black 'spraints' which it leaves in strategic places, like on boulders along its trails, which warn other otters to 'keep out'. They are said to be sweet smelling like lavender when fresh and contain mostly fishbones. The mink's droppings – 'scats' – do not have a pleasant smell and often contain fur and feathers as well as fish bones.

Swimming

Only the otter's head and part of its tail are usually visible above the water whereas mink swim with more of their

body higher out of the water. Both are very efficient swimmers.

General behaviour

Otters are very shy, secretive, usually nocturnal, territorial and solitary, except when a mother is with her cubs. Tracks and spraints are the best indicators that an otter is around. Otters like to play however, and have been observed using mud or snow slides into water. Mink are less shy and may continue with its business in the presence of humans. It has been known to defend itself against cats and dogs.

Breeding

Otters usually have between 2-4 cubs, born in a 'holt' – a nest in a tunnel or cavity in the riverbank or tree roots. Cubs stay with their mother for about a year, learning how to survive, after which time they are forced to leave to find their own territory. Mink usually have between 5-6 kits which stay with their mother for a much shorter time.

If you see an otter please let us know by emailing sightings@ywt.org.uk.

Find out more

If you are not a member then find out more about Yorkshire Wildlife Trust and how to become a member, plus more about the work we do for Yorkshire's wildlife by contacting us in the following ways:

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Otter swimming - Credit Amy Lewis