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Renaissance of the Italian otter

Are otters making their way back into Italy? By *Stephanie Sears*

"Something is going on," remarks Andreas Kranz with obvious satisfaction. Andreas is an Austrian wildlife ecologist who first monitored the presence of otters in southern Austria in 2004. There, on the outskirts of Villach, the second largest city in Carinthia, fifteen kilometres from the Italian border, he found evidence of otter colonization through the presence of eight spraints left on the inner stone and cement skirting of a bridge. The low height of the bridge offers the otter a cave-like protection against the suburbia surrounding it, and sheltering the faeces from rain and snow gives the surest indication of the animal's presence.

The sweetish, jasmine-like odour of the spraint, often prominently placed on rocks as a territorial mark, is unmistakable. Because the smell is enduring, this aspect of the faeces is considered to determine its age; several of them left at different times in one spot signal a permanent otter settlement. Other significant traces left by this otherwise discreet Mustelid are its five-toed and webbed footprints and the c and 'half bound' movement of its short legs.

Mainly nocturnal and a champion at concealment the Eurasian otter (*Lutra lutra*) is rarely average weight of eight kgs for a male and five to six kgs for a female and a body length the ankle-deep and crystal-clear water of a small stream, Kranz assures me, the otter c human eye.

Extinct in North and Central Italy

To make things more difficult for the would-be observer, it has become rare or extinct in where it used to be common, its presence once spreading uninterrupted all the way to F was found all over Italy but today is extinct in all the northern and central part of the pe populations are found only in the southern provinces of Basilicata, Campania, Puglia, Ca nucleus in the central southern regions of the Abruzzi and Molise.

Yet its capacity to survive near urban areas when given access to improved environment water and sufficient food resources may explain why the otter seems to be on the verge Italy. The Danube Basin, north of Italy, is an important conduit of otter expansion stimul environment and stricter conservation rules than in the past. There appear to be three p Italy: near Brenner in southwest Austria, in the area between Arnoldstein and Tarvisio r east still, by the river Isonzo (Saca) along the Slovenian-Italian border. Precise routes h: Andreas Kranz believes that one of the most plausible courses towards Italy would follow Gail and on to the Gailitz.



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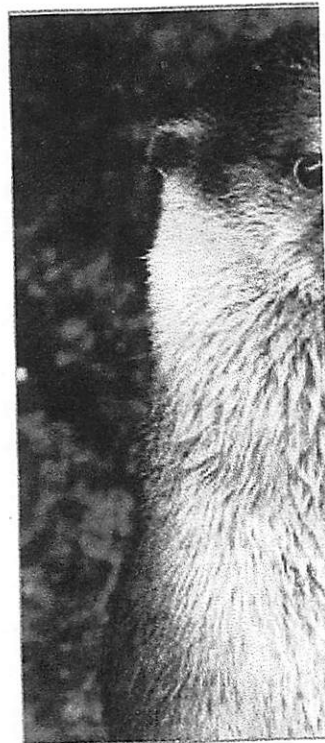
The sweetish, jasmine-like odour of the spraint, often prominently placed on rocks as a territorial mark, is unmistakable. Because the smell is enduring, this aspect of the faeces is considered to determine its age; several of them left at different times in one spot signal a permanent otter settlement. Other significant traces left by this otherwise discreet Mustelid are its five-toed and webbed footprints and the characteristic 'half bound' movement of its short legs.

Mainly nocturnal and a champion at concealment the Eurasian otter (*Lutra lutra*) is rarely seen. Its average weight of eight kgs for a male and five to six kgs for a female and a body length of a metre and a half in the ankle-deep and crystal-clear water of a small stream, Kranz assures me, the otter can swim under a human eye.

Extinct in North and Central Italy

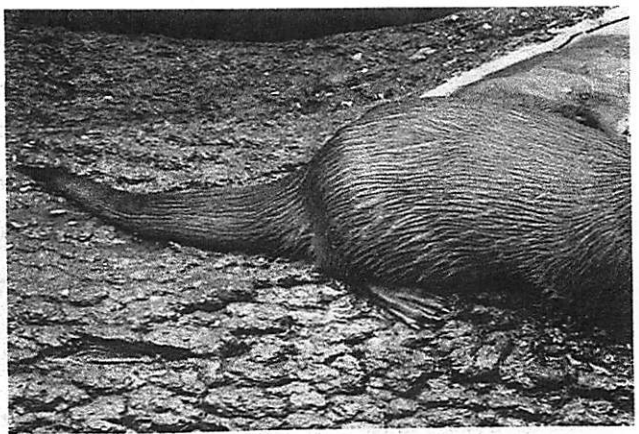
To make things more difficult for the would-be observer, it has become rare or extinct in much of northern Italy where it used to be common, its presence once spreading uninterrupted all the way to the Alps. It was found all over Italy but today is extinct in all the northern and central part of the peninsula. Otter populations are found only in the southern provinces of Basilicata, Campania, Puglia, Calabria and Sicily. A small nucleus in the central southern regions of the Abruzzi and Molise.

Yet its capacity to survive near urban areas when given access to improved environmental conditions and sufficient food resources may explain why the otter seems to be on the verge of re-expanding in Italy. The Danube Basin, north of Italy, is an important conduit of otter expansion stimulated by a more favourable environment and stricter conservation rules than in the past. There appear to be three probable



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In the 1960s the otter suffered terribly from the heavy use of DDT



A few otters survived in Southern Italy, and the population is increasing slowly, but they suffer from being too isolated.
Credit Stephanie Sears.

pesticides (dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane) used in agriculture and from PCBs (Polychlorobiphenyls) used in pesticides and plastics, the latter particularly nefarious to the otter's fertility. When the numbers plunged and ecologists raised an alarm, hunting became illegal in 1977; but the animal continued to be trapped sporadically. Though DDTs and PCBs ceased to be used by the mid 1980s, the enduring presence of heavy metals in the water, the cementing of river banks, the damming of rivers affecting water flow, the growth of the Italian human population in the last half of the twentieth century and the consequent urban agglomerations, compounded to finish off the otter in northern Italy.

Southern Italy otters hung on

The end of otter hunting and the cessation of the use of DDTs and PCBs had, however, given the chance to the south to bounce back from the nadir of 150 individuals found in all of Italy between 1993 and 2000 to 220 to 260 today, allowing the Italian otter to graduate from 'critically endangered' (following the International Union for the Conservation of Nature) to merely 'endangered' in 2001. Yet the situation is still so uncertainly as they remain particularly vulnerable to genetic isolation and to discontinuous populations.

Isolation

This is the case for the estimated 67 otters found in the Molise region by Anna Loy, professor of ecology at the University of Molise and her students, founders of the 'Gruppo Lontra Molise'. The population is relatively sparse and a fair amount of open countryside remains, little of it is off the main roadways. Passageways are needed to connect the Molise otter group to the south's larger core. Other persistent accusations surviving from the past, such as the perceived competition for fish between otters and new dangers such as the increasing number of road kills, each otter casualty having dire consequences.

Action plan

A 2009 National Action Plan details ways to secure the future of the Italian otter, giving priority to the otter's environment: water quality, restoration of riparian vegetation and measures allowing otters to move safely under roads. The essential goal of the Action Plan is to re-establish a closer and more harmonious relationship between wildlife and human activity.

The otter does not attack domestic animals or livestock and adapts to semi-urban areas, even where there is no proper riparian cover. While it has been and is still accused by anglers of catching the larger fish (the otter eats two to three fish a day), the charge is not supported by evidence and ecologists have found that smaller-sized fish in rivers are not the left-over remains of otter banqueting but the natural catch of the water.

Failed reintroduction

Previous efforts to reintroduce the otter in the Piedmont's Ticino Park failed accidentally because the otters from England proved to be hybrids of Eurasian (*Lutra lutra lutra*) and Southeast Asian (*Lutra lutra*) otters. Some of these otters escaped or were intentionally released from the enclosed area in which they were kept.

Italy: near Brenner in southwest Austria, in the area between Arnoldstein and Tarvisio more to the east still, by the river Isonzo (Soca) along the Slovenian-Italian border. Precise routes have yet to be determined. Andreas Kranz believes that one of the most plausible courses towards Italy would follow the Gail and on to the Gailitz.



Otters were heavily persecuted in Italy, and also suffered badly from DDT and other chemicals.
Photo Credit Stephanie Sears

Beyond the well-watered region of the Venetian lagoon awaits with its favoured marshland rich in marine life, a place inhabited and may again occupy in the future. Nothing disturbs its present expansion.

Who cares?

But why should one care after all? Few have been captivated by Henry Williamson's Ring of Bright Water. It is a matter of indifference to an industrially vital region where even otters are expected to contribute to economic development. In the centre of Italy the opportunity to open countryside has been nil.

There are several reasons why Italian otters are a reappearing species in their native habitat. It is a creature of exceptional physique is accompanied by a remarkable playful vivacity which gives this but luxuriantly furred little carnivore the status of a 'flagship species' and therefore a magnet for developing nature tourism. It is also

the subject of some disagreement among scientists - to be an 'umbrella species', an indicator of environmental health, including human beings. Apart from the aesthetic and emotional benefits to humans, in a densely populated and industrialized part of Italy the reappearance of the otter would also indicate environmental improvement, efforts towards improvement have finally allowed nature to reassert its

Water is essential to the otter and it lives equally well near streams, rivers, lakes, ponds and swamps. Its holt (main den) or couch (temporary resting place) further than five to ten metres from water, in tree cavities, roots or folded reeds along the banks; remaining both close to the safety of its holt and close to its food. Its diet consists mainly of fish & eels, but also frogs, snakes and sometimes even small mammals. Its rapid metabolism and the need to keep high body temperatures under water give it a voracious appetite. With a hunting range of twenty kilometres or more, the female, ten kilometres or more; but the otter needs waterways to settle a new permanent territory.

The otter's small, comely physique and its adaptable and unthreatening proximity to humans make it an ideal and easy candidate for wildlife preservation in our compact European wilderness. Its presence has and will continue to give an accurate assessment of the value we place on wildlife and nature.

Environmental degradation & hunting

Before environmental degradation led the Italian Eurasian subspecies (*Lutra lutra lutra*) to extinction in the country, it had already been much diminished by traditional otter hunting with trident and hook. In the northern regions of Como, Brescia, Cremona, Pavia. Considered a nuisance by fishermen the otter was eradicated, its beautiful fur was sold for a profit and in the Veneto its meat was eaten.

dismay of other conservationists individuals may still survive in the wild and it is hoped that t
with Eurasian otters coming from across the border. Future attempts to reintroduce Eurasian
but since genetic variation among Eurasian otters in Europe is slight, the possibility of the ani
to northern Italy from Austria is favoured by the IUCN.

Whether it be spontaneous or reintroduced, the return of the otter to northern Italy, if proven
be the victory of a captivating and long persecuted animal but also a far greater victory for pe
even in the most densely inhabited and industrialized of regions, a new era of uncontaminated
enriching co-habitation between wildlife and human beings.



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