



PRESS RELEASE

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VOLUNTEER OTTER SPOTTERS NEEDED ON BIRMINGHAM'S CANALS

A charity is on the lookout for 'volunteer otter spotters' to carry out the first formal survey into how one of the nation's best-loved mammals is faring on Birmingham's famous canals.

The Canal & River Trust, which cares for 2,000 miles of waterways in England & Wales, is looking for local people that can help them build a picture of the otter population on Birmingham's formerly industrial waterways.

Since the 1950s the number of otters on Britain's waterways have been in decline, due to a combination of habitat loss, persecution and the use of pesticides. However, otter numbers have been making a comeback in recent years due to better water quality and efforts to improve their habitats.

Previous studies have focussed on otter populations in rivers but now the Trust, working with students from the University of Birmingham, is about to begin the first proper study into how they are doing in the region's more urban canal environments.

The volunteers will be asked to walk along the city's canals each week for two months looking for signs of otters. In particular they'll be looking for otter droppings, known as spraint, and 'latrines' – areas where the animals mark their territory. They'll also be building a picture of the potential for otters by making a note of features such as the amount of vegetation cover, the width of the canal and the variety of plant species visible on the bankside.

Otters have very large territories and their presence is a real indicator of a thriving waterway and are a sign of healthy fish populations.

The team will also be monitoring shrews in canalside hedgerows, in particular the elusive water shrew which has venomous saliva that it uses to stun its prey of frogs, shrimps or caddis fly larvae – and which is harmless to humans. They'll be looking for places to put survey boxes which will be loaded with mealworm bait and then checked a few weeks later for signs of shrews.

Paul Wilkinson, ecologist for the Canal & River Trust said; "Just a few years ago you would never have imagined that otters would be seen on Birmingham's formerly industrial canals yet that's exactly what they've been doing over the past few years.

"There's been a real concerted effort over the years to improve water quality on the city's canals and now we're reaping the benefit with wonderful species such as otters able to venture right into

the heart of the city. These days there are fewer spaces available for nature so we need to start looking at how we can provide safe habitats for wildlife to live alongside us.

“What we need to do now is to build up a picture of where both otters and shrews are and that’s where we need the help of local people. Their support will enable us to see exactly where these important species are most active and, importantly, where they aren’t so that we can then put measures in place to extend the safe habitats available to them.”

To find out more about becoming a volunteer otter spotter contact Paul Wilkinson at enquiries.westmidlands@canalrivertrust.org.uk

More details about volunteering with the Trust can be found at www.canalrivertrust.org.uk/volunteer

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Notes to editors:

The Canal & River Trust is the guardian of 2,000 miles of historic waterways across England and Wales, caring for the nation’s third largest collection of listed structures, as well as museums, archives, and hundreds of important wildlife sites. We believe that *living waterways transform places and enrich lives* and our role is to make sure there is always a place on your doorstep where you can escape the pressures of everyday life, stretch your legs and simply feel closer to nature. www.canalrivertrust.org.uk / @CanalRiverTrust / @crtcomms