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Where otters dare, all is right with the natural world

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Sat, Jan 26, 2013, 00:00

ANOTHER LIFE:It's an age since I saw an otter. On sorties to the strand, somewhat rarer now, I check a tuft of grass at the freshwater pool where a stream runs out to the channel. Green and lush from repeated doses of nitrogen, it bears the remains of the latest spraint, the otter's dropping; a tarry morsel with a musky, not displeasing scent.

And then, walking the tideline, I watch for the track of an otter, bringing its fish – small and flat, mostly, from these sandy shallows – across to the dunes to chew among the marram. Or else, where the strand meets a rocky headland, tracks where an otter cuts up through a cleft in the dunes to a little marshy lake, there to rinse the sea salt from its fur.

There have been grand encounters, each good for a column or a marvellous minute of film: otter besieged by a raven for its fish; otter skipping past Michael Longley's shins as paddled in an autumn surf; otter ascending the highest dune to pause at the frozen shadows of the Vineys and their dog. Now I rest content with the occasional trail of prints – the slanted arc of toes around the pad is precise and distinctive as a potter's mark.

Otters hold so much of the essence of the wild, or as much as this island can boast. Where there are otters, water is clean, fish can flourish, banks have proper holes to rest in, people largely mind their own business – all's reasonably right with the natural world.

And so how amazing to be told of the 11 individual otters living in and around the centre of Cork city, feeding on eels, salmonids and crabs (and occasional, incautious rats).

To know it's 11, and not the same ones several times over, needed a close survey and a high-tech laboratory. In the summer of 2011, spurred on by zoologists from University College Cork, volunteers from the Cork branch of the Irish Wildlife Trust began looking for otter signs across the city: spraints on ledges and rocks, tracks in mud.

The spraint gave up not only the otters' diet but also their sex and individual DNA, analysed at Waterford Institute of Technology. Most were female, and some formed part of a family group. The number has startled the scientists. It may prompt a wider DNA study to explore the commuting patterns of the otters, a species already known to range over 20km or more.

In Britain, organochlorines in agricultural chemicals played a big part in the severe decline of otters that began some 50 years ago: by the 1970s, they were wiped out in most of England.

Commuting habits

In Ireland, the cattle country of Co Cork produced a notorious level of run-off pollution and huge fish kills. It inspired "remedial" drainage that carved riverbanks into canals, sweeping away the stands of willow and alder that gave otters a place to rest. To know the commuting habits of Cork's city otters might

show how much they use Munster's farmland rivers and how much they depend on the richer, cleaner ecosystems of estuaries and coast.

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