

Building a Log pile otter holt

Why build an otter holt?

Otter numbers crashed from the 1950's, mainly due to post war use of organochlorine pesticides, hunting and habitat destruction. Otters are not known to be breeding in Sussex, although there are increasing numbers of migrant and resident otters.

The nocturnal otter needs safe lying up sites to rest in during the day. Natural resting sites would be found under bankside tree roots, or in dense undergrowth adjacent to healthy rivers and particularly under mature ash and oak tree roots. Each otter will require around 30 sites in its territory.

In recent years many bankside trees have been cleared and natural holt sites have become rare. Artificial otter holts provide resting places, while natural otter habitats are recovering in the long term. Otters can live in most wetlands including floodplain woodland, reedbed, rivers and fens.

Where should I put an artificial otter holt?

Artificial holts should be located where there is little natural cover, as an otter will choose natural holt sites in preference to man made ones. The holt should be built anywhere near a wetland where there is minimal disturbance, by humans and particularly by dogs. The holt should be easy to enter but not drafty.

A log pile holt can literally be a pile of logs, or it can be a constructed feature with chambers and a roof. They also create good habitat for birds & insects. A log pile holt is built on the ground surface and is more temporary than a chamber holt or plastic holt. The holt may need to be tied down with stakes and wire, to stop logs being washed away in floodwater. The holt should be easy to enter but not drafty and should be dark inside. If possible, fence off an area of land around the holt, particularly if livestock is present.

Either plant with local tree species, or leave to develop scrub cover naturally. By doing this you are providing good otter habitat in the long term and short term.

Legal requirements

Contact your local Environment Agency office as Land Drainage Consent is required for log pile holts and tree planting within 8m of a main river. Tel 08708 506506



Otter © Tom Maddox

Unsuitable locations for otter holts

- Disturbed sites i.e. locations next to footpaths
- Locations that flood frequently
- Polluted or heavily silted watercourses
- Sites near local fisheries
- Sites on the eroding bend of a river or watercourse

Suitable Locations

- Undisturbed sites on river meanders or unused field corners fenced as an otter sanctuary.
- Sites with oak, ash, thick blackthorn scrub or bramble on river banks.
- Sites where tributaries join a main river channel.
- Sites with clean water and a ready supply of natural food such as fish, amphibians and crustaceans.

Preparation Time

Depending on manpower, around half to one day for construction and installation of the holt.

Recommended Tools and Materials

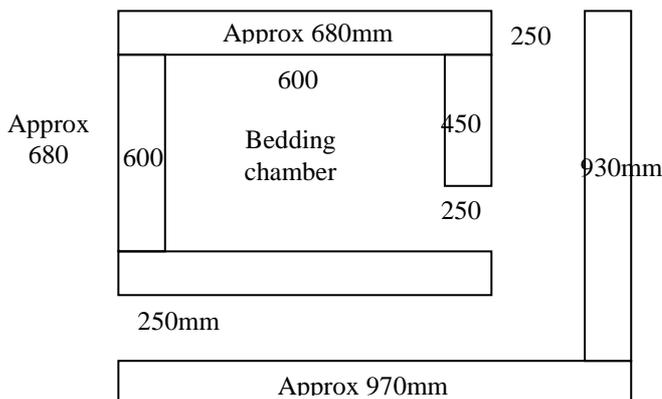
Heavy duty gloves, tape measure, sledgehammer, bowsaw, chainsaw and certified operator (to cut logs – or pre cut before coming onto site), sheep netting or fencing wire, hammer and nails if required, wooden stakes (3-10cm diameter) – some with notches, approximately 20 logs between 20-40cm diameter, large number of stakes/branches 10-30cm diameter, large pile of brush. **NOTE** it is easier to harvest logs and brush from coppicing operations on site.

Building the holt

A holt should be built to incorporate a bedding chamber measuring 600x600x450mm, with an internal entrance measuring 200-250mm, and at least one external chamber/corridor with two exits to the outside (min 250mm width).

Stage 1: Building the walls

Logs of 30-40cm diameter should be placed on the ground to mark out the shape of the holt, including the outline of the bedding chamber (see diagram below). Secure logs in place with stakes 3-10cm in diameter. Exits and corridors should be at least 200mm wide to allow otters to turn around. If necessary pile logs on top of each other and stake to secure them, so the roof of the holt is 450mm above the ground. Remember to include the width of your logs when measuring out sizes of internal chambers. One exit should face towards the water and one exit should face towards dry land.



(Diagram shows min. recommended holt size)

Stage 2: The roof

Once the walls are 45cm high and stabilised, place branches 3-10cm in diameter across the top of the logs to form roof struts. These can be nailed on to walls if required. Cover struts with brush until no light enters the bedding chamber. Tie roof down firmly with wire and stakes.

Remember to stack brush on the roof high, as fresh brush will dry down and disintegrate over time. Other vegetation can be placed over the holt to camouflage it, and willow whips or scrub can be planted around the holt. You may need to periodically check the holt so that brush can be renewed to retain weather proofing and so that wires can be re-tightened.



A natural otter holt in tree roots

NOTE:

A flat rock near to the holt entrance can serve as an ideal territorial marking point for any visiting otter and would be a good place to look for their sign.

For further information contact:

Sussex Otters and Rivers Project
(01273) 497555, or 07769 886696
www.sussexotters.org

Environment Agency

(Ask for your local FRB team or Land Drainage department). 08708 506506

The Sussex Otter and Rivers Project (SORP) is a partnership between Sussex Wildlife Trust, South East Water, The Environment Agency and Southern Water Services. SORP promotes the sustainable management of Sussex river catchments, and the restoration of wetland habitats for people and wildlife, and in particular the Otter, Water vole and Black Poplar tree.

