tussen Duin & Dijk

Connection and defragmentation

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Noord-Holland welco

The otter was successfully reintroduced in the Netherlands in 2002-2008. The province of Noord-Holland realised that the otter will settle in the region in the future and has taken defragmentation measures. This paid off in 2016, with an otter sighting at one of the N236 wildlife passages between the Ankeveense Plassen and the Naardermeer.

History

Around 1900, the otter (*Lutra lutra*) was a relatively common occurrence in the Netherlands and even considered a pest. This was not only due to the animals' fish-centred diet, but also because of the damage they could cause to fish traps. Bounties were paid for the destruction of otters, and otter fur, too, was much in demand. Even Artis at the time would 'order' an annual delivery of otters from the Naardermeer to supplement the zoo population, which was seen as very normal. Even so, writings from as early as 1864 mention a population in decline (Veen & Broekhuizen, 1992). Van Wijngaarden and Van de Peppel (1970) retraced the prevalence of otters in the Netherlands across different periods in history. Around 1900, the otter was prevalent in approximately sixty of the Noord-Holland atlas blocks (5x5 km^2) (figure 1). The second half of the nineteenth century saw a continued steady decline, and mentions of 'rare occurrences'. By 1942, otters were no longer considered vermin, but rather furred game. Moreover, in large parts of the Netherlands, otters were no longer being hunted, which allowed for a gradual recovery of populations to occur. Between 1945 and 1962, the otter was only found in six atlas blocks in the Vechtplassen area. In 1979 an otter was sighted in the wild in the Naardermeer for what was probably the last time. For the 1982-1988 period, the Atlas van Nederlandse Zoogdieren (Veen & Broekhuizen, 1992) mentions three atlas blocks in Noord-Holland, with definite sightings in Waterland and one in De Botshol (Utrecht), which is an atlas block that overlaps with Noord-Holland. The latter report is from 1986 (Nolert & Martens, 1989). Not much later, by 1989, the species seems to have disappeared completely (Lammertsma & Niewold, 2016). The otter population's deterioration was caused by a combination of several factors that have been since been reported on extensively. Habitat fragmentation and road fatalities are currently important factors in this regard, with 20% of the Dutch otter population falling victim to traffic (Lammertsma & Niewold, 2016).

A comeback?

Between 2002 and 2008, the otter was successfully reintroduced in the Netherlands. A steady recolonisation can be observed throughout the Netherlands (figure 2). Having been absent from Noord-Holland for 24 years, on 11 June 2010 an otter was captured by a wildlife camera in the Vechtplassen area (Van den Akker & Harder, 2010). Despite an intensive camera-trap study aimed at also detecting pine martens (*Martes martes*) in this area, this sighting was to be the only one. On 5 September 2011, a road kill victim was found (♀) by the side of the Bloklaan (N403) in Loosdrecht.

During major road works in 2013, two wide wildlife passages under the N236 were created to connect the Naardermeer and Vechtplassen nature reserves, among other intentions hoping to create a safe place for animals to cross. A camera-trap

The wildlife passage under the Gooilandseweg (N236) where the otter was captured by the wildlife camera on 4 November 2016. Photo: Geert Timmermans.

mes the otter

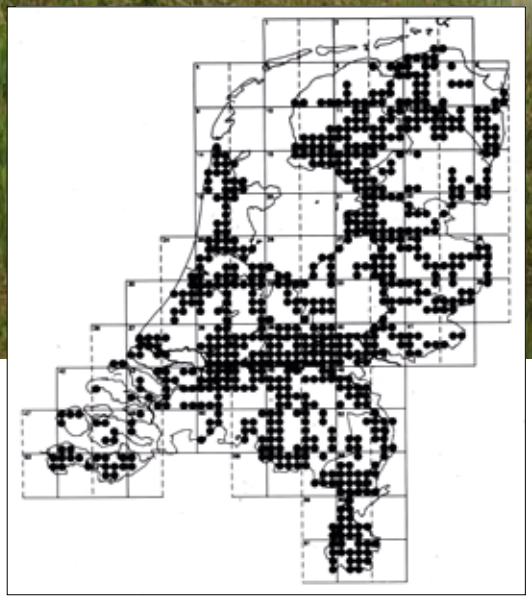

Figure 1. The geographical distribution of the otter circa 1900 (from Van Wijngaarden & Van de Peppel, 1970).

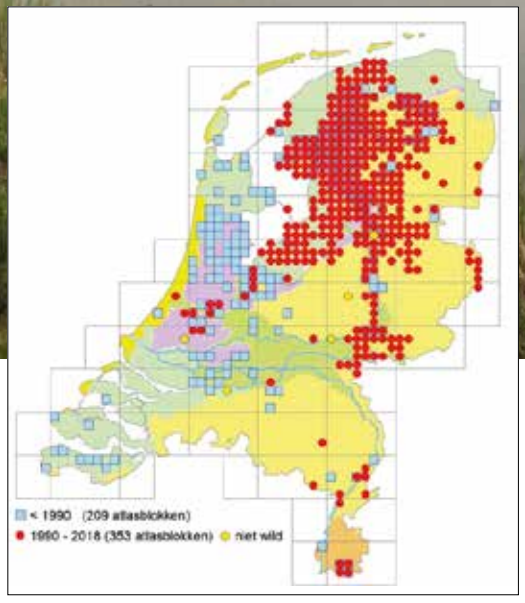

Figure 2. Otter observations (the red dots) after reintroduction in the Netherlands in 2002 (© NDFF).

study has shown that foxes (*Vulpes vulpes*), pine martens and roe deer (*Capreolus capreolus*) have been crossing there right from the start.

Hollandse Brug

At the annual gathering of the Bever- en Otterwerkgroep CaLutra on 12 March 2016, taking place at the Ankeveense Plassen, the working group split up into small groups to look for traces of otters. Under the expert guidance of an experienced tracker they were able to find a fresh otter print near the Hollandse Brug in Muiderberg. They also came across some old spraints (otter faeces) on the basalt blocks on the banks of the lake. The otter is widespread in Flevoland and at this site, the banks of both provinces are a mere 300 metres apart. On 20 March, 30 October and 18 December 2016 and 4 February, 24 October and 23 December 2017, the group searched in vain for tracks – in the context of the NEM Verspreidingsonderzoek Otter (the national Ecological Monitoring Network study monitoring the presence of otters). The absence of spraints does not necessarily imply the absence of otters: if there are no conspecifics in the area, the otters will have no reason to mark their territory. In December 2016, two wildlife cameras were installed. This resulted in 20,000 photographs mainly featuring waves, brown rat (*Rattus norvegicus*) and some birds.

Ankeveense Plassen

Between 8 October and 6 November, a wildlife camera was in place close to the new wildlife passages under the Gooilandseweg (N236, photo). The camera had been positioned along the ditch delineating the adjacent pasture. This again resulted in a great many photographs of rippling water, brown rat, roe deer and birds. One of the very last photos, taken on 4 November (photo), however, revealed an otter. Between 13 November and 10 December 2016, three cameras were in place along that same ditch, this time failing to capture any sign of an otter. Natuurmonumenten subsequently ventured further into the Ankeveense Plassen area to place

The first otter was caught on camera near the N236 wildlife passages on 4 November 2016. Photo: Edo Goverse & Geert Timmermans.

cameras there. They did manage to capture an otter there on 24 November 2016. Meanwhile, wildlife cameras permanently mounted under the two passages have (as yet) failed to capture any otters; see the article 'Online monitoring through wildspotter.nl' in this same edition (Van Heukelum & Van den Dries, 2018). From 7 October 2017, the same pasture fencing post was fitted with another wildlife camera, that over twelve days did not capture any sign of otters.

Naardermeer

With the above in mind, Natuurmonumenten decided to install wildlife cameras in the Naardermeer nature reserve as well. On 12 and 13 March 2017, that decision paid off when an otter was caught on camera. In this same area, a few days later, another otter was captured on film. In April, cameras were placed along the banks of another part of the Naardermeer. On 11 April, they were able to capture the moment when a curious otter came to check out the old duck decoy. In the summer of 2017, some landscape photographers saw an otter swimming ahead of their boat. This time, no photographs were taken of the event, despite the number of cameras present (they had the wrong lenses on).

What's next?

Otter numbers in the Netherlands appear to be on the up. The animals are being sighted more frequently and in new places, also towards Noord-Holland. An otter was seen at the Afsluitdijk for instance, some years ago. Spraints have been found on the Houtribdijk, connecting Lelystad and Enkhuizen, and the Nieuwkoopse Plassen area in Zuid-Holland now has an established otter population. Odds are that they actually travelled through Noord-Holland on their way there.

Good news: no roadside casualties have been reported so far.

Recurring camera trap observations in the Vechtplassen area would seem to suggest that otters have already settled in Noord-Holland as well. What is also good news is that no roadside casualties have been reported so far. Nonetheless, the region will continue to be extremely dangerous for otters so long as no measures have been taken to prevent animal casualties on busy provincial roads. The provincial government is planning to create fencing and otter passages along the Vreelandseweg (N201) by 2019. The plans can be found in Van der Grift & Jansman 2016. Plans are also being made for the Bloklaan.

In 2019, ProRail is set to incorporate seven fauna passages into the railway line going through the Naardermeer, which would also benefit the otter. Worthwhile mentioning in this regard is that in 1966, an otter had been found run over on the railway tracks, on what was an illegal excursion by youth organisation NJN.

In the next few years, additional focus will be put on mapping the species and its habitats in the Naardermeer and Ankeveense Plassen areas. In addition to the search for spraints, wildlife cameras will be an important instrument, and at least twenty cameras will be used. A subset of the cameras will be installed at fixed locations in and around the areas, others will be used flexibly and moved from time to time. This combination is meant to provide an insight into where otters actually occur and clarify in which ways they use the region and whether there are any problematic areas or bottlenecks. Finding signs of reproduction, of course, would be even better. In early October 2017, the first cameras were put in place. During the winter period, the general focus will be on finding spraints and, in case of snowfall, prints. Until now (June 2018) this had not led to any new observations.

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