



European Otter *Lutra lutra* (L.) Attacking Tufted Duck *Aythya fuligula* (L.)

Author(s): D. T. G. Quigley and G. Rogan

Source: *The Irish Naturalists' Journal*, Vol. 28, No. 11 (Dec. 7, 2007), p. 470

Published by: Irish Naturalists' Journal Ltd

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25536856>

Accessed: 27/05/2010 08:26

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European otter *Lutra lutra* (L.) attacking tufted duck *Aythya fuligula* (L.)

At around mid-day on 6 January 1986, one of the authors (DQ) was observing a flock of tufted duck *Aythya fuligula* (L.) about 50m off the N shore of Lough Furnace (L970980), a brackish-water lake in Co Mayo. Suddenly, and for no apparent reason, the flock took flight, except for one male duck which was obviously struggling at the surface. It soon transpired that the duck was being attacked from beneath the surface as it was repeatedly drawn under the water. The duck finally disappeared from sight but it was noticed again within a few minutes, this time in the jaws of a European otter *Lutra lutra* (L.) only a couple of metres from the boulder-strewn shoreline. As soon as the otter saw the author, it dived, taking the duck with it. Although the otter was not seen again, a few minutes later the duck was found abandoned amongst the boulders, still alive but bleeding profusely from lacerations to its abdomen. It is assumed that if the otter had not been disturbed, it would have eventually killed and eaten the duck. Despite its ordeal, the duck was successfully treated with an antibiotic (Terramycin) and nursed back to health before being released ten days later on 16 January.

Ducks and other water fowl are often included as part of the diet of the European otter (Chanin, P. 1985 *The natural history of otters*. Facts on File, New York; Fairley, J. S. 1975 *An Irish beast book*. Blackstaff Press, Belfast; Harris, C. J. 1968 *Otters: a study of the recent Lutrinae*. Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London; Hayden, T. & Harrington, R. 2000 *Exploring Irish mammals*. Town House, Dublin; Kruuk, H. 2006 *Otters: ecology, behaviour and conservation*. Oxford University Press, Oxford). However, most of this evidence has been based on the examination of otter spraints (faeces) rather than on first-hand witnessed attacks.

Moffat (C. B. 1927 *Irish Naturalists' Journal* 1: 209-212) specifically referred to the discovery of tufted duck remains at otter 'dining tables' in Britain. Although Gormally, M. J. & Fairley, J. S. (1982 *Journal of Zoology, London* 197: 313-321) discovered the remains of Charadriiformes (gulls & waders) in otter spraints at Lough Furnace as well as Anseriformes (ducks & geese) and Ralliformes (rails) at nearby Lough Feeagh, they concluded that aquatic birds were of minor importance in the otter's overall diet at these locations. Tangney, D. E. & Fairley, J. S. (1994 *Irish Naturalists' Journal* 24: 434-440) noted that the percentage occurrence of Anseriforme remains in otter spraints at several freshwater sites in Connemara National Park ranged from 2 to 14% while Murphy, K. P. & Fairley, J. S. (1985 *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 85B: 47-55) noted that the percentage occurrence of 'bird' remains in otter spraints at various marine sites on the west coast of Ireland ranged from 1 to 8%. Ottino, P. & Giller, P. (2004 *Biology & Environment: Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 104B: 1-17) noted that while 'bird' remains (primarily Rallidae) only accounted for 2.78% of the otters' overall diet in the Araglin Valley in southern Ireland, they were significant in certain habitats (27.3% in moorland) where fish were relatively scarce.

Tufted duck are notable winter visitors to Lough Furnace where flocks of up to 70 individual birds are frequently observed (GR pers. obs.). When available in significant numbers, aquatic waterfowl may constitute a seasonally important item in the diet of otters, particularly during the winter months.

Acknowledgements: We would like to acknowledge with thanks the helpful comments provided by Prof. James Fairley (retired professor, Department of Zoology, NUI Galway) and Dr Hans Kruuk (Department of Zoology, University of Aberdeen).

D. T. G. Quigley

Dingle Oceanworld (Mara Beo Teo), The Wood, Dingle, Co Kerry

G. Rogan

Salmon Research Agency, Farran Laboratory, Furnace, Newport, Co Mayo