

REPORT

NEW LOCALITIES OF THE EURASIAN OTTER *Lutra lutra* (Linnaeus, 1758) IN THE UPPER EUPHRATES RIVER BASIN, A REMARKABLE RANGE EXTENSION IN WESTERN IRAQ

Omar F. AL-SHEIKHLY¹, Mukhtar K. HABA², Filippo BARBANERA³

¹Department of Biology, University of Baghdad, Iraq. +964 7901 7890 24 Email: alsheikhlyomar@gmail.com

²Department of Biology/College of Science for Women, University of Baghdad, Iraq. +964 7902 3997 21 Email: mukhtarhaba@yahoo.com

³Department of Biology, University of Pisa, Via A. Volta 4, 56126 Pisa, Italy. Tel. +39 050 2211386; Email: filippo.barbanera@unipi.it

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Abstract: Records of the Eurasian Otter (*Lutra lutra*) have been confined to the waterbodies of southern, central, and northern Iraq (Kurdistan). Although its status in the Upper Euphrates River Basin in western Iraq is not fully explored, it seems to be rare. In August 2019, two adult Eurasian otters were reported from two new localities in Anbar Province after being strangled by fishing nets. These records represent the first photographic evidence for a remarkable range extension of the Eurasian Otter distribution range in western Iraq.

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THE EURASIAN OTTER IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The Eurasian Otter (*Lutra lutra*) is one of the most widely distributed Palearctic mammals. Its zoogeographical range covers parts of three continents: Europe, Asia and Africa (Ando and Corbet, 1966). The species' southernmost range in the Middle East is formed by a patchy distribution of disconnected populations that occur in Turkey, Palestine and Israel, Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, Iran, and Iraq (Roos et al., 2015; Yoxon and Yoxon, 2019).

In Turkey, the Eurasian Otter was once common and widespread throughout western and eastern parts of the country and around the Black Sea (Turan, 1984). Overall, the population has been notably reduced over the past 50 years (Eroglu, 1994). It was recorded from Rivers Dide, Firat, Aras, and Kura in Anatolia as well as in Seyhan, Ceyhan, Asi, Goksu and Aksu in the area of Aegean Sea, and from around Cannakale on the northwestern coast (MacDonald and Mason, 1994). However, a recent increase was noted in the northeastern part of the country associated with the development of aquaculture systems (Conroy *et al.*, 1998). On the other hand, various studies related to the Eurasian otter distribution, habitat selection, and food preferences in Turkey have been carried out over the last 20 years (Toyran and Albayrak, 2019).

In Palestine and Israel, the Eurasian Otter was fairly common. It was recorded from the shores of Lake Tiberias, Lake Huleh, the Sea of Galilee, and the mouth and upper reaches of the Jordan River where they are locally common (Harrison and Bates, 1991; Dolev et al., 2006). Eurasian otters were also recorded from Dan, the Beteha Valley, Tirat Zevi, Bet She'an Valley, near Akko on the northern coastal plain, and in the borders with Lebanon (MacDonald et al., 1986; Yom-Tov, 1986). Nevertheless, the

species has vanished from the southern coastal plain and it is now restricted to En Nimfit Nature Reserve in the northern coastal plain, with a resident population in the Golan Heights (Illani, 1987; 1988). However, since 1960s, the Eurasian Otter population has dramatically declined and more than 100 individuals might still remain in Israel (Yom-Tov, 1986; Shalmon, 1994; Reuther and Dolev, 2000; Dolev and Perevolotsky, 2004). A single record from the Zvulun Valley and Carmel coastal area suggests the existence of a remnant population along the coast, which might be now extinct (Dolev et al., 2006; Guter et al., 2006). More recently, the presence of distinct subpopulations of the Eurasian Otter have been documented in Hula, Harod and Yisrael valleys, in the Sea of Galilee Basin and the Jordan Valley, and the Golan Heights (Cohen et al., 2013).

In Jordan, the Eurasian Otter is restricted to the rivers Jordan, Yarmouk, and Zarka (MacDonald and Mason, 1994; Reuther et al., 2001). While the species is still thriving in the River Jordan, yet its population size is not fully known (Yoxon and Yoxon, 2019).

In Lebanon, the Eurasian Otter was recorded at Ammik Swamp (Lewis et al., 1968; Harrison and Bates, 1991). Recently, it was reported from Hima Anjar (Hima Kfar Zabad, Anjar, Beqaa Valley) but believed not to exist elsewhere (Loy et al., 2016; Ramadan-Jaradi et al., 2019).

In Syria, the Eurasian Otter occurs along the Euphrates River from Deir ez-Zor up to Abu Kamal (at the Iraqi border), Al Mayaddin and Doura Europos, but it is absent in the north-westernmost area of Raqqa (Masseti, 2009). The species population has declined over the last 40 years mainly due to the irrigation scheme and river management at Deir-ez-Zor during and following the construction of the Tabaqa dam (Jacques, 1998). It was reported from the Khabur Valley, an island in the Euphrates River at Doura Europos, Halabiyyeh, Tell Sheikh, and along the River Khabur, with these sites being all located in the district of Deir-ez-Zor (Kock et al., 1994; Uhrin et al., 2000).

In Iran, the Eurasian Otter is found throughout the country, being absent only from central and southern desert regions. The species has been reported from Gilan, Mazandaran, Azarbaijan, Tehran, Kordestan, Kermanshah, Markazi, Isfahan, Khorasan, Chaharmahal-Bakhtiari, Fars, Khozestan, and Lorestan provinces (Ishunin, 1977; Kiabi, 1993; Tajbakhsh, 1995; Gutleb et al., 1996; Melisch and Rietschel, 1996; Ziaee, 1996; Mirzajanei, 1998, 1999; Mirzaei, 2006). The species can be also found in the Zagros, Elbruz and Koppe-Dagh mountain ranges, in the Iranian Azarbaijan, in the Hamoon Wetland bordering with Afghanistan, and possibly found on the southern shores of the Caspian Sea (Ziaie and Gutleb, 1997; Conroy et al., 1998). Two subspecies of the Eurasian Otter are recognized in Iran: *L. l. seistanica*, which occurs throughout the country and *L. l. meridionalis* which is confined to the banks of the Heermad River (Eetemad, 1984). The species was reported from Jajrood, Taleghan, and Neka rivers, the Sangar Dam, Gorgan, and Shenrood (Karami et al., 2006). Recent studies (e.g. Mirzaei et al., 2009; 2010; Hadipour et al., 2011; Naderi et al., 2017) identified the ecological requirements of this species across Iran.

In Iraq, two otter species are found, namely the Iraq's Smooth-coated Otter *Lutrogale perspicillata maxwelli*, which is confined to the marshes of southern Iraq, and the Eurasian Otter (Al-Sheikhly et al., 2015). The latter occurs in almost all suitable aquatic habitats along the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers mainly in the southern parts of the country, although few records are known from central and the north (Kurdistan). The Eurasian Otter was reported from Amara, Qalat Salih, Baghdad and Hindiya, the Central Marshes, in the vicinity of Al-Maimona, Abusakhir, Musharah River, rivers of Mashab and Salal in eastern Hammar Marsh, Tarmiya, Al-Alam, Samarra Lake,

Himreen, Khan Al-Baghdadi, Haditha, Derbendikhan, Dukan, Little Zab, Barzan, and TaqTaq (Cheesman, 1920; Sanborn, 1940; Hatt, 1959; Harrison and Bates, 1991, Al-Sheikhly and Nader, 2013; Abass, 2013). The first photographic evidence for the occurrence of the species in Al-Hammar Marsh and Mosul Dam in southern and northern Iraq, respectively, was recently provided by Al-Sheikhly et al. (2017) (Fig.1).

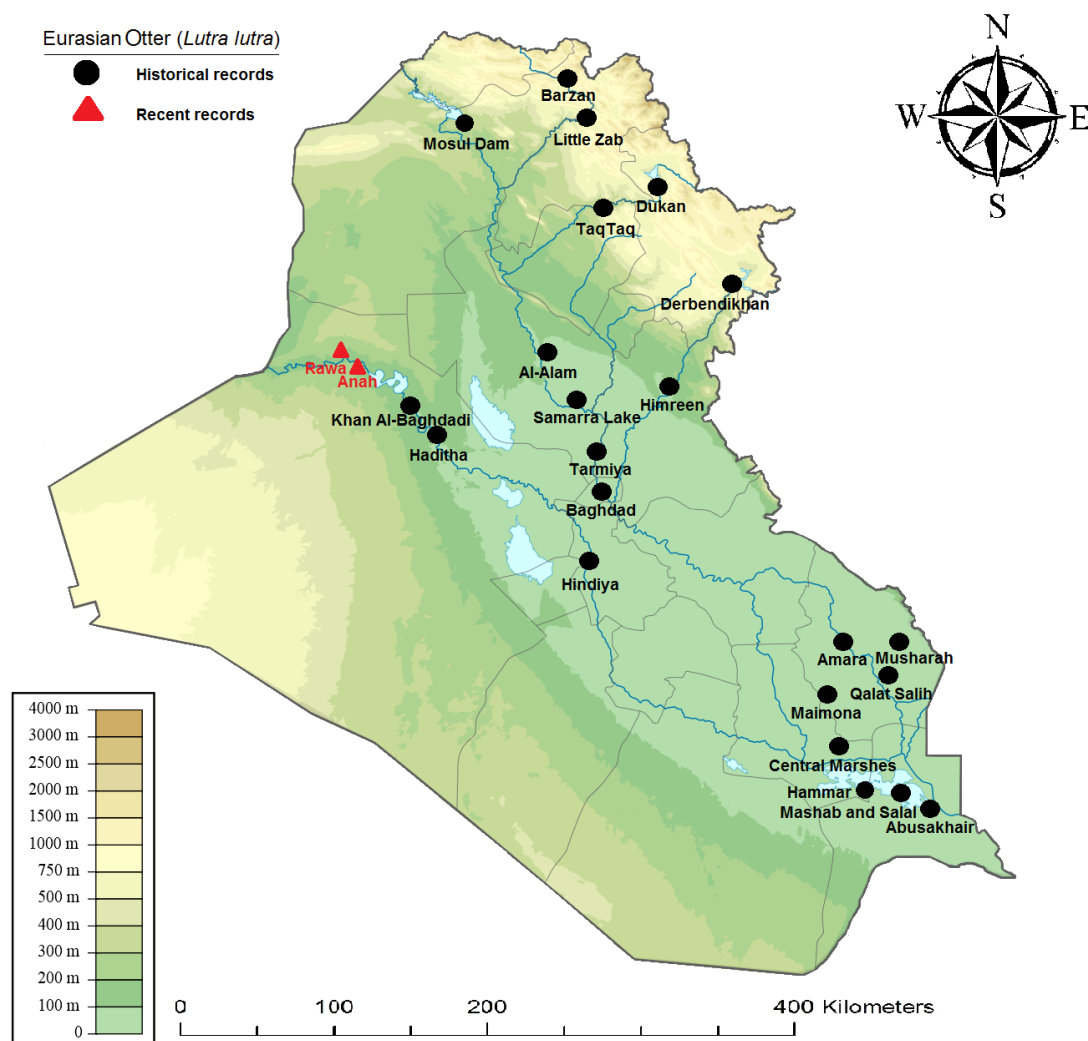


Figure 1. The geographical distribution of the Eurasian Otter (*Lutra lutra*) in Iraq with historical and recent records.

RECENT RECORDS IN IRAQ

In the present study, we report two new localities for the occurrence of the Eurasian Otter in the Upper Euphrates River Basin of the desert plateau in Anbar Province of western Iraq (Fig. 1).

Our recent records are based on photographs of dead specimens supplied by local fishermen and supported by interviews and personal communications. An adult male Eurasian Otter was reported by a local fisherman along the eastern bank of the Euphrates River near Anah (Anah Al-Jadydah) (34°23'N 41°59'E) on 20th of August 2019 (Fig. 2A & B). An adult female Eurasian Otter was reported by a local fisherman from the western bank of the Euphrates River near Rawa (Rawah) (34°28'N 41°54'E), c. 12 km to the northwest of Anah on 22nd of August 2019 (Fig. 2C). The habitat of both sites is comprised mainly of riparian vegetation of dense reed beds, *Tamarix* sp. shrubs, *Populus* sp. and *Ziziphus* sp. trees, and Date palm orchards which lined both banks of the Euphrates River and infiltrated by narrow brooklets and runlets (Fig. 2D). Interviews indicated that both otters died after being strangled and drowned in the drift

fishing nets that were set by the local fishermen in the main watercourse of the Euphrates River. The local fishermen did not recognize the dead otters at first and referred them as to “Qundis” (Eurasian Beaver: *Castor fiber*, Rodentia). This misidentification did not come as a surprise, as the local fishermen are not used to see Eurasian otters in the streams and waterways of the Euphrates River in western Iraq, where they appear to be extremely rare. However, after a close morphological examination of the dead animals, with a special focus on their cranial parts, they were confirmed to be Eurasian otters by the authors of this study.

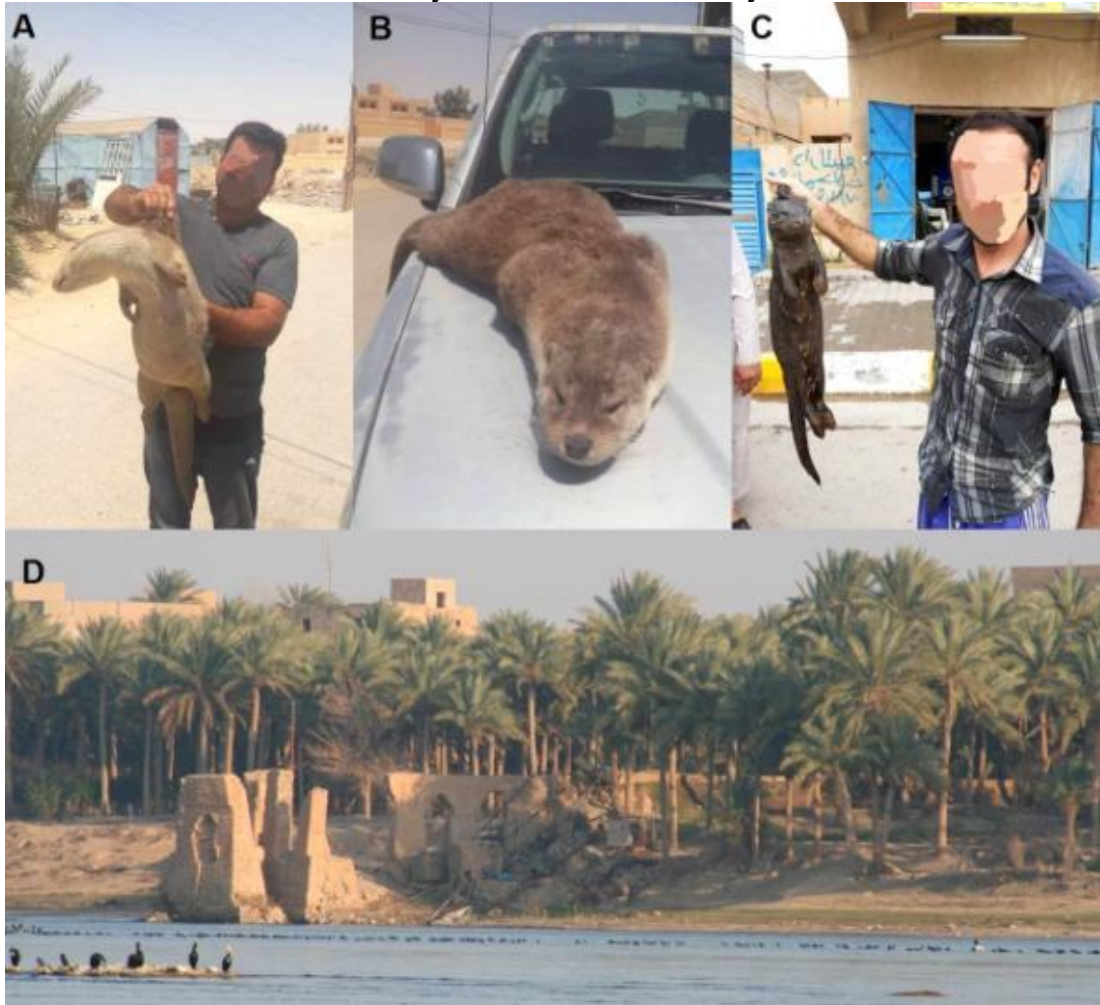


Figure 2. A and B: adult male Eurasian Otter in Anah; C: adult female Eurasian Otter in Rawa (photos© Yassir Al-Rawi); D: the landscape of the Euphrates River banks in Anbar Province in western Iraq (photo © Ali N. Al-Barazangi).

The status of Eurasian Otter in the Upper Euphrates River Basin in western Iraq is enigmatic; scarce information from unverified reports were obtained from Khan Al-Baghdadi and Haditha (Al-Sheikhly and Nader, 2013). While a small isolated population of the Eurasian Otter might be present in the Upper Euphrates River Basin across the area of western Iraq and eastern Syrian borders, more in general the species appears to be rare. Jacques (1998) suggested that if Eurasian otters were present in the Euphrates River in eastern Syria, then they might have come from up-or downstream of the bordering countries. More recently, Masseti (2009) reported that a small population of the Eurasian otters is still present in eastern Syria between the confluence of the Euphrates with the Khabur River and the border with Iraq. In western Iraq, our interviewers indicated that Eurasian otters may be still found in the Euphrates River and around large lakes (e.g. Al-Qadissyah Lake 34°15'N 42°20'E), as they are attracted by fish abundance and fish in nets, similarly to what had just occurred in the vicinities

of Anah and Rawa. Recently, fishing activities in western Iraq has increased after the flooding of the Euphrates River; large fish were probably washed down from upstream countries such as Turkey and Syria (Al-Bayar M. pers. comm., 2019). The two current records reported in our study represent the first confirmed photographic evidence for a remarkable extension of the Eurasian Otter distribution range in western Iraq. The two records described above were obtained ca. 50 km away from the westernmost edge of the species known range in the country, namely Khan Al-Baghdadi and Haditha sites (Al-Sheikhly and Nader, 2013). In addition, the distance between the two recovered dead individuals was ca. 10 km, which is larger than average (7.5 Km) male and within (10.2-19.3 Km) of the female known home range extension in a riverine habitat (Ó Néill et al., 2009). Although further monitoring is certainly required, these records suggest the possible occurrence of at least two distinct subpopulations and mark out a significant expansion of the species range with respect to the previously available data in western Iraq.

CONCLUSIONS

Besides man-made impacts on aquatic ecosystems, the Eurasian Otter global population is facing a dramatic decline in parts of its distribution, the lack of information from many regions of its range, and the sensitivity of the species to sudden changes in threats; therefore, it has been listed as Near Threatened by the IUCN Red List (Roos et al., 2015). Strangulation and drowning of otters in drift nets and other fishing nets has been highlighted as a major cause of mortality of Eurasian otters from range countries (Reuther and Hilton-Taylor, 2004; Roos et al., 2015). Specifically, besides habitat destruction and illegal hunting and trapping, conflict with fishermen has been highlighted as a major threat to the Eurasian Otter populations in Iraq. Nevertheless, urgent conservation actions are warranted for Eurasian otters throughout the Middle East and Iraq (Al-Sheikhly et al., 2014). In recent years, a conservation program for both Eurasian and Smooth-coated Otter populations was established especially in the southern marshes of Iraq following the collaboration between the University of Baghdad (Iraq) and the University of Pisa (Italy). The main outcomes of such research work dealt with (i) constant monitoring of distribution, size, and habitat preference of both species populations, (ii) genetic identification using molecular DNA markers (e.g. Moretti et al., 2017), and (iii) raising awareness on major threats on both species, which, overall, will significantly help to establishing effective management plans.

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RÉSUMÉ

NOUVELLES PRÉSENCES DE LA LOUTRE EURASIENNE *Lutra lutra* (Linnaeus, 1758) DANS LE BASSIN SUPÉRIEUR DE L'EUPHRATE, UNE EXTENSION REMARQUABLE DANS L'OUEST DE L'IRAK

Les enregistrements de la loutre eurasiennne (*Lutra lutra*) ont été limités aux plans d'eau du sud, du centre et du nord de l'Irak (Kurdistan). Bien que son statut dans le bassin supérieur de l'Euphrate à l'ouest de l'Irak ne soit pas complètement exploré, elle semble être rare. En août 2019, deux loutres eurasiennes adultes ont été signalées dans deux nouvelles localités de la province d'Anbar après avoir été étranlées par des filets de pêche. Ces enregistrements représentent la première preuve photographique d'une extension remarquable de l'aire de répartition de la loutre eurasiennne dans l'ouest de l'Irak.

RESUMEN

NUEVAS LOCALIDADES PARA LA NUTRIA EURASIÁTICA *Lutra lutra* (Linnaeus, 1758) EN LA CUENCA SUPERIOR DEL RÍO EUFRATES, UNA DESTACABLE EXTENSIÓN DE SU RANGO DE DISTRIBUCIÓN EN IRAQ OCCIDENTAL

Los registros de Nutria Eurasiática (*Lutra lutra*) han estado confinados a los cuerpos de agua de Iraq del sur, central y del norte (Kurdistan). Aunque su status en la cuenca superior del Río Eufrates en Iraq occidental no está completamente explorado, parece ser rara. En Agosto de 2019 fueron reportadas dos nutrias eurasiáticas adultas, de dos nuevas localidades en la Provincia de Anbar, después de que se enredaran en redes de pesca. Estos registros representan la primer evidencia fotográfica de una destacable extensión del rango de distribución de la Nutria Eurasiática en Iraq occidental.

ARABIC ABSTRACT

مواقع أنتشار جديدة للقضاعة الأوراسية (*Lutra lutra* (Linnaeus, 1758) في أعلى حوض نهر الفرات, أمتداد جدير بالملاحظة لمدى الأنتشار في غرب العراق
تتركز مناطق تسجيل القضاعة الأوراسية (*Lutra lutra*) في المسطحات المائية في جنوب, وسط, وشمال العراق (كوردستان). بالرغم من أن الوضع الحالي للنوع في أعالي نهر الفرات غير مكتشف بشكل كامل, إلا أنه قد يبدو نادراً هناك. في آب 2019, تم الإبلاغ عن اثنين من القضاعات الأوراسية البالغة في مناطق أنتشار جديدة في محافظة الأنبار بعد أن أختنقت بشباك صيد الأسماك. تمثل التسجيلات الجديدة الدليل الصوري الأول لأمتداد جدير بالملاحظة لمدى أنتشار القضاعة الأ