

Aberllefenni Slate Quarries
Otter survey report
June 2020

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Summary

A survey for the presence of otters was undertaken along a 500m length of the Afon Llefenni, Aberllefenni, Gwynedd. This was prior to working of slate tips to extract larger pieces of value. The survey revealed that otters frequently use this section of river, and are using at least one slate waste cavity near the works as a holt. It was concluded that although this is a continuation of existing work, already tolerated by otters here, that there is a potential for disturbance of otters and their habitat. It is therefore recommended that a European Protected Species licence application is submitted to Natural Resources Wales (NRW).

1.0 Introduction

A survey was undertaken for Eurasian otter *Lutra lutra*.

This survey is a requirement of existing planning permission, prior to work being undertaken to process quarried slate at Aberllefenni Slate Quarries. This work is a long-term plan, for a minimum of 20 years.

The work will involve the removal and working of two existing slate tips of material, sorting and sizing of material, particularly extracting larger pieces for monument work. This is a continuation of existing work. For this report, the two tips will be titled 'west' and 'east'.

1.1 Location

A 500m section of the Afon Llefenni, Cwm Hengae, Aberllefenni, Gwynedd. Central grid reference SH7677 1016. See Figure 1 for location.

1.2 Survey date

29.05.20.

1.3 Surveyor & report author

Ms Jan Baylis MCIEEM. The surveyor has over 15 years of field ecology experience, specialising in water vole, otter and dormouse ecology, together with farmland and upland birds, and protected sites management.

1.4 Weather

Dry, very warm, breeze 1/12¹, cloud 0/8². This followed a long period of dry weather.

2.0 Wildlife legislation

In August 2007, changes were made to European law. Under The Conservation (Natural Habitats, &c.) (England and Wales) Regulations 1994 as amended by The Conservation (Natural Habitats, &c.) (England and Wales) (Amendment) Regulations 2007 (The Habitats Regulations), and now updated to The Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017, it means that damage to a significant group of a European Protected Species (EPS) (which includes otter, all bat species and dormouse for example) or its resting/breeding place as an 'incidental result' of an otherwise lawful activity is illegal. To deliberately affect an EPS, where deliberately can mean where an EPS has been recorded and then damage to it occurs as a result of an activity, is a breach of the Regulations. Where a habitat looks suitable for an EPS, then a survey should be carried out to assess if it is present. If

¹ Beaufort wind scale range 0-12

² Oktas cloud cover scale range 0-8

present, a licence from NRW may be granted so that an activity can be done under certain conditions.

3.0 Methodology

The river, banks and adjacent block slate were surveyed for the presence of otter field signs (spraint, feeding remains, obvious holts/lie-up sites, slides) for 50m upstream and downstream from the area of work. The otter survey method used incorporated aspects of the standard methodology for a full survey, as summarised by RSPB, NRA & RSNC (1994) in the New Rivers and Wildlife Handbook.

Additional guidance was referred to in the Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management's Competencies for Species Survey: Eurasian otter (CIEEM, 2013).

The visits were not carried out during or shortly following periods of heavy rain or during high water, and infact followed a long period of dry weather.

4.0 Results

See photographs in Appendix 1, and Figures 2 and 3 showing annotated aerial maps with Target Notes (TNs).

The river corridor is well vegetated with plenty of cover for otter. There is frequent dense bramble *Rubus fruticosus*, wood rush *Luzula* sp., and tree cover of willow *Salix* sp., alder *Alnus glutinosa* predominantly, leading upstream to ash *Fraxinus excelsior*, beech *Fagus sylvatica*, sycamore *Acer pseudoplatanus*, Sessile oak *Quercus petraea* and gorse *Ulex* sp.

There was considerable evidence that otters regularly use this section of river and the adjacent slate banks and cover. Several fresh, recent and old spraint (droppings) were recorded, with fresh spraint adjacent to the disused fisheries enclosures, and regular spraint deposits on the gravel and banks all along the section.

A probable lie-up or holt (or den) was noted under slate slabs to the eastern end of the survey section, opposite the proposed works. The cavity was inspected using a torch, but the tunnels extended beyond the torch range.

It was not physically possible to inspect all similar slate slab cavities along this section of river, and cavities at the base and faces of the tips, as some points were overgrown with bramble, unstable or steep. But the frequency of spraint presence on the river indicates that otters are likely to use the area for regular resting. It was not possible to confirm if otters are breeding in this location.

Some slate slabs are temporarily stored above the south river bank below the eastern tip to be worked, and are to be worked also, though the client may be willing to leave some for mitigation. A bund to prevent site flooding will be retained along the north bank.

5.0 Recommendations

It can be emphasised here that quarrying in Aberllefenni has a very long history, spanning over 500 years. Although no new slate is being mined, the works here have seen the using of block and waste slate for over 30 years, immediately adjacent to the survey site, and at the nearby slate workshop. It is therefore highly likely that otters have become conditioned to using the area, complete with the associate noise levels and human activity. The proposed work is a continuation of existing activity, is not planned to be a full time activity, will not be during twilight or dark hours, it is therefore recommended that this work is permitted to proceed.

However, because of the frequent signs of otter presence all along this stretch of river, the likelihood of at least one holt (den) site under the slate slabs, the difficulty in identifying all potential holts in the immediate area, and that some slate cavities will be removed or disturbed as part of the work, **the ecologist would like to recommend to the client that they take the precautionary approach of applying for a European Protected Species licence from Natural Resources Wales (NRW).** This will involve an ecologist producing a method statement, which is designed to produce practical solutions to protecting the otters and allowing work to continue. This survey report can be used to inform this method statement process.

Further advice on this process is found on the Natural Resources Wales website, under **Guidance & advice → Wildlife and biodiversity → European Protected Species.**

6.0 References

- CIEEM (2013). *Technical Guidance Series. Competencies for species survey: Eurasian otter.* Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management, Winchester.
- RSPB, NRA & RSNC (1994). *The New Rivers and Wildlife Handbook.* RSPB, Sandy, Bedfordshire.

Figure 1. Survey site location (marked by red flag).



Appendix 1. Target notes, field note photographs and other comments accompanying Figures 2 & 3.

T1. SH76088 10084. Two very fresh spraint on bank near disused fish enclosures.



T2. SH76942 10061. Recent spraint on gravel. Woodrush, hazel, oak, willow lined here. Slate slabs & waste on bank.



T3. SH76893 10093. Probable lie-up/holt (den site). Cavity under slate slabs on N bank. Several recent & old spraints outside. Cavity extends beyond torch beam. This area is not due to be moved but will be disturbed through noise.



T4. SH76780 10168. Below bridge. 3 recent spraints on gravel & tussocks on gravel.



T5. SH76654 102261. Five recent and old spraint on gravel bed at boundary.



T6. At tips to be moved. Dense woodrush & bramble adjacent to river. No obvious cavities here.



TN7. Frequent dense bramble & willow along here, which could provide cover for otter.



TN8. Eastern tips to be worked. No major cavities noted, but very difficult terrain to notice all cavities.



TN9. View from footpath to back of south tip to be worked.



TN10. Western-most tip, to be worked. As annotated. Looking NW.



TN11. Tip to be worked at SE end of quarry works. As annotated, approximately. Looking SE. Afon Llefenni on L of picture, at tree line.

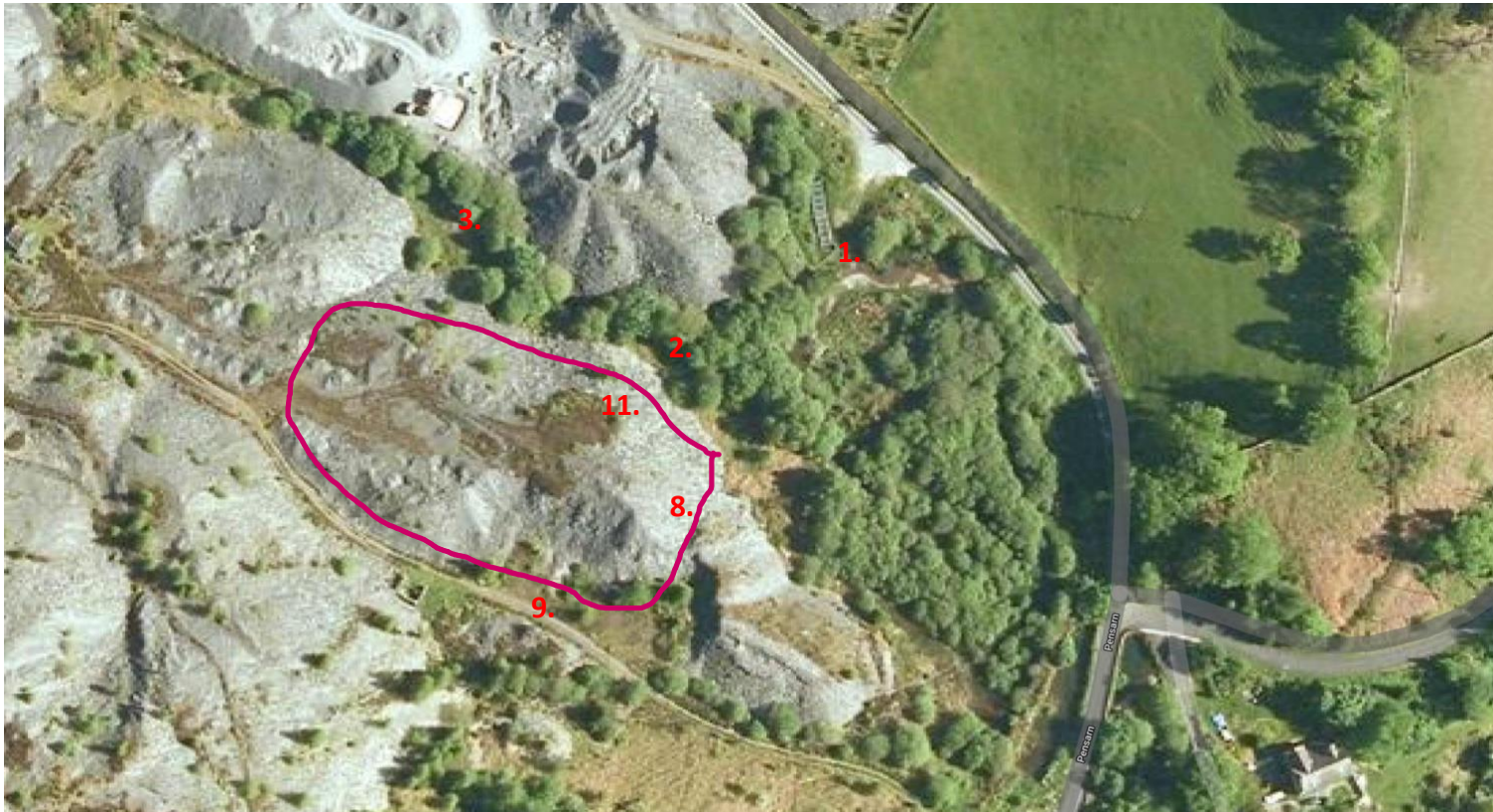


Figure 2. Aerial of east end of site, with Target Notes, & approximate area to be worked (in pink line).

Aberllefenni - Google Maps

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Google Maps Aberllefenni



<https://www.google.com/maps/place/Aberllefenni,+Machynlleth+SY20+9RY/@52.6739405,-3.8211963,.4m/data=!3m1!1e3!4m5!3m4!1s0x486562e53b698f91:0x6a290f93446e58ad!8m2!3d52.6731814d-3.817865> Page 1 of 2

Figure 3. Aerial of west end of site, with Target Notes, and approximate area to be worked (in pink line).

Aberllefenni - Google Maps

12/06/2020, 10:49

Google Maps Aberllefenni



<https://www.google.com/maps/place/Aberllefenni,+Machynlleth+SY20+9RY/@52.6753457,-3.8245062,4m/data=!3m1!1e3!4m5!3m4!1s0x486562e53b698f91:0x6a290f93446e58ad!8m2!3d52.6731814d-3.817865> Page 1 of 2

