# World’s smallest otter rediscovered in Nepal after 185 years amid new conservation efforts



Otters, celebrated for their playful nature and adept hunting skills, play a crucial role in maintaining the balance of aquatic ecosystems by controlling fish and shellfish populations in rivers, lakes, and wetlands. Among the species found in Nepal, the smooth-coated otter faces escalating threats from overfishing, habitat destruction, pollution, and fur demand. A dedicated conservation initiative in the Lower Karnali River region attempts to mitigate these challenges while supporting local communities that have depended on the river for generations.

The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) is spearheading a comprehensive three-year project aimed at the Lower Karnali Watershed. This initiative actively collaborates with Indigenous groups like the Sonaha and Tharu communities. As Amit Sonaha from the Sonaha community states, "The river has been a way of life for us. We Sonaha live by the river and perish by the river." These communities are particularly vulnerable to illegal fishing practices and environmentally damaging activities such as the extraction of sand, gravel, and stone, which jeopardise fish populations and threaten their traditional livelihoods.

WWF has been working closely with local village leaders, community forest groups, and governmental officials to develop effective conservation strategies. A key component of this initiative has been the establishment of fifteen Community River Stretch Management Groups, responsible for monitoring the river and preventing illegal activities. Additionally, the project has equipped 375 local members with training in sustainable fishing practices that respect the breeding seasons of fish. Prominent conservation advocate Komal Sonaha, who passionately promotes local otter conservation, has adopted the title "Uduwa waali," meaning Otter Lady, reflecting her commitment to the cause and her role in educating the community about sustainable practices.

A landmark achievement of this conservation effort has been the rediscovery of the Asian small-clawed otter in Nepal—a significant milestone after 185 years without confirmation of its existence. The sighting of a juvenile otter in November 2024 near the confluence of the Rangun and Puntara Rivers in Dadeldhura district has instilled hope for the species’ survival in the region. This rediscovery underscores the importance of continued habitat conservation measures and highlights the collaborative endeavor between researchers, conservationists, and local populations to safeguard Nepal's rich biodiversity.

To further strengthen these conservation efforts, an Otter Conservation Action Plan is being developed. This strategic framework aims to coordinate protection measures for otters and their habitats throughout Nepal. The WWF's integrated model not only addresses ecological needs but also promotes the sustainable livelihoods of Indigenous communities. By involving local populations in scientific monitoring and fostering awareness about the ecological significance of otters, the project aims to establish a collaborative stewardship model that can serve as a blueprint for similar initiatives in other regions.

With its focus on community engagement, sustainable practices, and scientific research, the project sets a promising trajectory for the conservation of otters and their habitats—offering a hopeful outlook for both the natural ecosystems and the livelihoods of the local communities intertwined with their fate.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://dailygalaxy.com/2025/06/worlds-smallest-otter-finally-found/), [[2]](https://www.darwininitiative.org.uk/news/2024/09/17/protecting-smooth-coated-otters-in-nepal/)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://dailygalaxy.com/2025/06/worlds-smallest-otter-finally-found/), [[2]](https://www.darwininitiative.org.uk/news/2024/09/17/protecting-smooth-coated-otters-in-nepal/), [[5]](https://www.himalayanotternetwork.org/)
* Paragraph 3 – [[3]](https://risingnepaldaily.com/news/56642), [[4]](https://news.mongabay.com/2025/02/worlds-smallest-otter-makes-comeback-in-nepal-after-185-years/)

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://dailygalaxy.com/2025/06/worlds-smallest-otter-finally-found/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.darwininitiative.org.uk/news/2024/09/17/protecting-smooth-coated-otters-in-nepal/> - This article discusses a conservation project in Nepal's Lower Karnali Watershed, focusing on protecting smooth-coated otters. The project involves collaboration with Indigenous communities like the Sonaha and Tharu, who rely on the river for their livelihoods. Efforts include monitoring river stretches to prevent illegal activities, training local members in sustainable fishing methods, and developing a citizen science program for otter monitoring. The initiative aims to balance ecological needs with community livelihoods, fostering a collaborative stewardship model for otter conservation.
3. <https://risingnepaldaily.com/news/56642> - This article reports the rediscovery of the Asian small-clawed otter in Nepal after 185 years. A juvenile otter was found in November 2024 at the confluence of the Rangun and Puntara rivers in Dadeldhura district. The species had not been sighted in Nepal since 1839, leading to concerns about its extinction. The recent discovery confirms the species' presence in the country, highlighting the importance of habitat conservation and the need to address threats like habitat destruction and illegal fishing.
4. <https://news.mongabay.com/2025/02/worlds-smallest-otter-makes-comeback-in-nepal-after-185-years/> - This article highlights the confirmation of the Asian small-clawed otter's presence in Nepal after 185 years. The last confirmed sighting was in 1839, and the recent discovery in November 2024 in Dadeldhura district is significant for conservationists. The article discusses the challenges faced by otters in Nepal, including habitat degradation due to overexploitation, pollution, and unsustainable fishing practices. It emphasizes the need for comprehensive conservation plans to protect otter populations and their habitats.
5. <https://www.himalayanotternetwork.org/> - The Himalayan Otter Network is dedicated to the conservation of otters in the Himalayan region. The website provides information on various otter species, their habitats, and ongoing conservation efforts. It highlights the importance of community engagement and research in otter conservation. The network collaborates with local communities, researchers, and conservation organizations to monitor otter populations, address threats, and promote sustainable practices. The website also features updates on recent discoveries and conservation initiatives related to otters in the region.
6. <https://www.rufford.org/projects/jyoti-bhandari/conservation-status-survey-and-awareness-of-smooth-coated-otters-in-babai-river-of-bardia-national-park-nepal/> - This project aims to identify and map the distribution of smooth-coated otters in the Babai River, Bardia National Park, Nepal. It involves conducting surveys to gather data on the otter's habitat and distribution, assessing the socio-economic status of local communities, and preparing a habitat map with overlays of anthropogenic threats. The project also includes awareness and education programs to promote otter conservation among local communities, emphasizing the role of otters in maintaining healthy freshwater ecosystems.
7. <https://www.rufford.org/projects/pravin-giri/niche-overlap-and-awareness-initiatives-for-the-conservation-of-smooth-coated-otters-and-fishing-cats-lowland-region-far-western-nepal/> - This project focuses on studying the distribution and spatial overlap of smooth-coated otters and fishing cats in the lowland region of far-western Nepal. It involves field surveys using camera traps to estimate spatial niche overlap, analyzing dietary composition through scat analysis, and conducting awareness and community outreach programs targeting fishers, youths, students, and farmers. The project aims to identify local threats to these species and develop effective conservation measures through community engagement and research.