

## A KING IN HIDING

The barren, cold desert of Ladakh sees signs of a new life — the otter

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IT WAS the last day of August and winter was preparing to make its presence felt. In a couple of months, the roads would be clogged with snow, and another harsh six-month winter would be endured in this cold desert. The sun had just begun to rise from behind the Himalayas, when a pair of researchers — Prof Melissa Savage and Pushpinder Singh Jamwal — stumbled upon what could potentially be their holy grail. Because it happened this quick — in 15 minutes, when they were prepared to toil for a month — they peered at it, and their luck, with disbelief. The treasure they were huddled over? Otter shit.

It had all the markings of otter shit — bits of fish scales, fins, bone and vertebrae cast into tubular poop. In the dry heat of Ladakh, it had desiccated and turned greyish-black. When they poked a stick in, it instantly withered and its contents spilled. For a brief instant, the chilly breeze off the river Indus was filled with a faint fishy smell, wafting up from the crumbled faeces.

Jamwal leaned over and zoomed his camera into the dried mass and clicked a few pictures which were sent to Dr Nicole Duplaix, the chair of International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Species Survival Commission's Otter Specialist Group, an authority on otters. Her confirmation meant that, this was the first scientific evidence of the presence of otters in the trans-Himalayas.

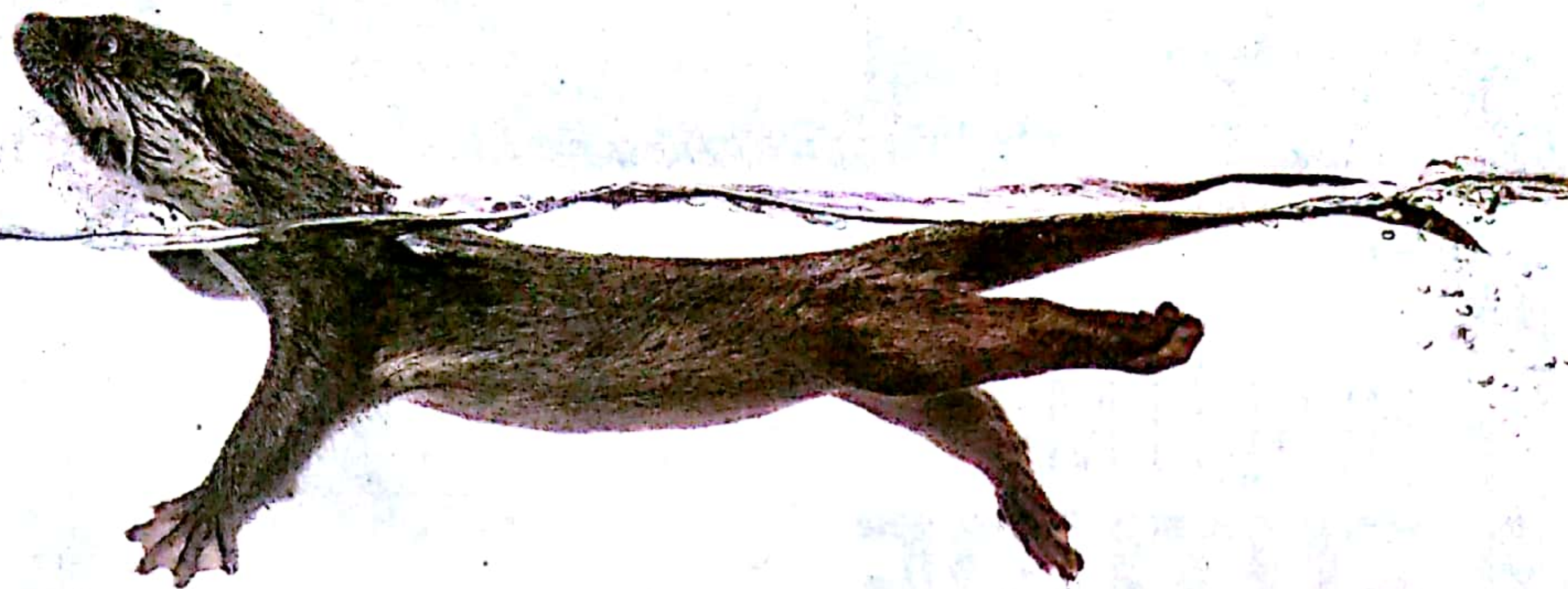
The otter is a rare and elusive mammal living in aquatic and semi-aquatic ecosystems and is classified as 'Near Threatened' by the IUCN. Mustelid features and playful antics give otters an adorable air, but in a river ecosystem they are the top boss, the apex predator. Think of tigers in forests or

snow leopards in the trans-Himalayas. These elusive weasels — hardly a foot long and weighing 7-12 kilos — rightfully stand next to them in stature. Otters are, however, better placed when compared to tigers and snow leopards, despite them being near threatened as well. Since the presence of top predators is usually proof of a healthy ecosystem, tangible evidence of otters would give us a lot of hope about the health of river ecosystems in the Indian trans-Himalayas.

Across the world, otter enthusiasts and experts are passionate over otter excrement, so much so that their poop has earned its own name — spraint. But this is no irrational obsession. Spraint is the truly reliable way to tracing otters. It is distinct and has its own smell — ranging from fresh, flowery to putrid and fishy. An otter's diet mostly comprises fish, which means that their spraint is usually made of the parts of fish that can't be digested, like bits of fish skeleton, scales and fins. The spraint has its own language, a code that tells all about the animal's ecology.

Dr Nicole only had to look at the picture once to affirm that the spraint was indeed from the Eurasian otter *Lutra lutra*, one of the three otter species found in India. This was a big deal. Because otters potentially represent an ideal flagship species, their conservation would help in conserving the ecosystems they inhabit.

Savage and Jamwal searched for signs of otters along the Indus, Suru, Zaskar and Dras rivers of Ladakh. "But otters are not very common in the river. We had to hunt hard to find evidence of the species," says the professor. "We worked along the Indus and Zaskar rivers, in steep gorges and



**AT HOME**  
(Above) The confluence of the Zaskar and Indus Rivers; (left) Eurasian otter in the winter season

along swampy, thorny thickets, looking for signs of the otter." Less reliable than a spraint is the pug mark — the five-toed mark of an otter's webbed feet, which may not be that defined on the sandy river beds of Ladakh. Still, at the end of their study, both had firmly established that otters were indeed present in the region. But where were they?

The next step of the study demanded photographic evidence. A difficult proposition since otters are more secretive than most creatures. Humans don't appeal to

them and, on even sensing human presence, they slip away. Perhaps, that's why there is limited anecdotal evidence and, unlike other animals, they are yet to find a place in the tales and myths of the region.

But European writers have been in thrall of otters for long. Scottish naturalist and author Gavin Maxwell's love for his pet otter can be seen all over *Ring of Bright Water*; and Henry Williamson's *Tarka (Tarka the Otter)* is, perhaps, the most famous otter in the world. The otter was also muse to poets Seamus Heaney and Ted Hughes. While Heaney admires the qualities of *Lutra lutra*, his poem, *An Otter*, is ostensibly about a woman out of his reach, much like the otter: "I sat dry throated on the stones/ You were beyond me."

Jamwal had to meticulously lay camera traps for close to a year to get a glimpse of one. Finally, an otter was caught on camera on the night of August 27, 2016. "I was highly sceptical of finding any otters in Ladakh until I stumbled upon a spraint myself," he says with a laugh. At the time, he was captivated by the other elusive predator of the mountains, the snow leopard, of which he has an enviable photographic collection.

After this discovery, a systematic study of otter populations, their habitats and threat factors has started. Jamwal has embarked on a study on otter populations and is developing a sound educational programme for the region. "The local Ladakhi community is innately sensitive to their environment," he says. "Problems like overfishing, which cause a decline in otter populations, are not prevalent here."

Local Buddhists consider fish sacred and, hence, it is not eaten in the region, leaving all the fish for otters to devour with their dextrous forehands. "In Ladakh, there are many good conservation programmes focused on snow leopard, wolves, birds. We hope that this find will encourage the authorities to include otter conservation in management plans," says Savage.

Preksha Sharma is a Bombay based writer. The story is part of her Indian Himalayas Climate Adaptation Programme-Centre for Media Studies Fellowship