Evidence of Shotgun wounded otters (Lutra lutra) in Sweden

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It is illegal to hunt otters in Sweden. Here we report the findings of shotgun pellets in otters necropsied in the wildlife disease surveillance in Sweden from 2012 to 2014.

Introduction
An incidental finding of shotgun pellets embedded in the lumbar area of a road-killed otter (Lutra lutra) prompted a three-year x-ray screening of all otters submitted to the National Veterinary Institute (SVA) for necropsy. The aim was to document the frequency of gunshot wounds, indicating illegal hunting of this protected species.

Methods
Radiographs were systematically taken of all otter carcasses found dead in Sweden and submitted for necropsy at SVA, from 2012 to 2014.

Results
The study found that three of 120 examined otters (2.5%) had embedded shotgun pellets from previous shooting injuries. All three otters had died of other causes than shotgun wounds; two were road-killed and one had drowned in fishing gear.

Besides the three otters in the present study, several shotgun pellets were incidentally found in the right hind leg of one juvenile otter sent directly to, and examined at the SMNH in 2014, where also, in another otter, a bullet from an air rifle was found behind the eye of a road-killed otter in 2013. These otters are not routinely x-rayed before dissection.

Discussion
The proportion of otters with embedded shotgun pellets in this study in Sweden is lower compared to a Danish study of 144 otters collected 1993-2011, where the proportion was 6.9%.

The number of otters actually killed by gunshot trauma is unknown, but can probably be higher than the number of gunshot wounded otters that survive, but are later killed of other causes.

Otters are apparently occasionally shot at, possibly due to mistaking them for non-native American mink (Neovison vison).

Conclusion
Illegal shooting of otters in Sweden:
2.5% of otters found dead

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Selected references