

## Not just incredibly cute: Rarer than the white rhino or giant panda, meet the litters of British Otterhounds, which could have saved the breed

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Britain's rarest breed of dog - which is more endangered than the giant panda and the white rhino - could have been saved after 19 puppies were born this month.

Just 20 British Otterhounds were born in the UK during the whole of last year so the arrival of the pups - born into two litters to owner Maria Lerego in Ledbury, Herefordshire, - has provided a vital lifeline to the dying breed.

There are less than 1,000 Otterhounds left in the world and about 300 of those are in Britain.



**Boost: Nineteen Otterhound puppies were born this month in the UK**

The numbers are far less than the 2,000 or so giant pandas left in the world and the 17,000 white rhinos.

Otterhounds date back to the 12th century when they were bred to hunt otters which were then seen as a pest.

But their numbers rapidly decreased when otter hunting was banned in 1978.

Experts fear the hounds could be extinct within ten years but Miss Lerego, a former Crufts best of breed champion, is fighting back with her one-man breeding programme.



**Puppy love: The birth of these puppies and their siblings is a cause for celebration as they could greatly increase the likelihood of the survival of their whole species**

The 48-year-old has bred about 200 puppies in 25 litters over the last 25 years.

But she has just experienced her most prolific year yet after bitches Calista and Symphony gave birth to the huge litters within several days of each other.

Miss Lerego, from Ledbury, Herefordshire, said: 'Only 20 were bred in the UK last year and 15 were born in a working pack so they wouldn't have been available to the general public to buy.'



**Puppy dog eyes: Miss Lerego is monitoring the puppies 24-hours a day as they are so small they could easily be squashed by their 80-pound mother**

'The other five were bred by me and sadly we lost two of them so only three were available as pets.

'I tried to breed last year and I was really beginning to tear my hair out that I wasn't going to get them mating.

'But, then two of my bitches did and fell pregnant about Christmas time.



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**Quite a handful: Miss Larego with a full size Otterhound, one of just 300 left in Britain**

'The first litter that arrived was Calistas and she gave birth to nine. Symphony gave birth a few days later to 11 but sadly one died.

'I am over the moon. We now have as many as we did in the whole of the last year for the country.'

Miss Lerego is watching the puppies around the clock because they are so young their mother can easily roll over and squash them. They only weigh a pound at the moment, while their mother weighs 80.



### **Bundle of joy: Otterhound puppies snooze together just days after they are born in Hertfordshire**

She believes Britain needs to keep its own native breeds going and is pleased she has received a lot of interest from people wanting to buy a puppy. The dogs sell for around £800, she says.

'The breed is still very much at risk if the numbers keep declining as they are at the moment but it is a much happier situation than five years ago,' she said.

'There are so few Otterhounds because they had never been available to the general public, so the public didn't know they existed.



**Hounds of love: Five dozy-looking puppies pose together. They will be taken to their new homes when they are around nine weeks old**

'They make excellent pets, they are a very sociable breed and they are intelligent.

'They are very easy going characters and quite laid back. If you gave them the choice of a hunt or an afternoon on the sofa, they would pick the sofa.'

Otter hunting began in the Middle Ages because there were so many of the small mammals that they were considered a pest. However in time hunting them became something of a sport.

By 1977 hunting the marine creatures was banned after otter numbers declined, mainly due to pollution and loss of habitat.



**Excellent companion: Otterhounds are a social and intelligent breed and quite laid back. However they are not the easiest dogs to train**

Miss Lerego said: 'After that some of the dogs went into Mink hound packs and some went into homes. But their numbers soon went downhill.'

Otterhounds are renowned for their excellent hunting skills and strong work ethic.

Although they are the largest scent hound they are not a danger to other animals; in the past they would wait for terrier dogs to kill the quarry.



**Shhhh!: Although the breed is known for its hard work ethic, Otterhounds prefer an afternoon on the sofa than hunting, according to Miss Lerego**

Paul Keevil, of the Kennel Club's vulnerable native breeds committee, said people had been put off from owning them because of their sheer size.

'They are not for novice dog owners because they are not the easiest dogs to train,' he said. 'They were bred to be independent and are used to working on their own initiative.'

'You can't really take them off the lead in a park because if they catch the scent of a rabbit or a cat they are off and they are very difficult to call back, you have to go after them.'