

Pollution Identification Guide

There are many different types of pollution that can be found in our waterways. Some, like chemicals and nutrients are hard to identify, but others are easier to see. Here are a few examples of the more common types of pollution:



Sewage

Sewage in the river can look brown, or it can look milky grey if it has been mixed with grey wastewater before it reaches the river. It can also smell strongly, and you might spot personal care or sanitary items in or around it, making it easy to identify. Sometimes sewage outlets themselves can also be seen.



Mine water

Mine water in a river can be quite distinctive and is often a vibrant orange colour. It can flow out of abandoned mines, bringing high levels of iron and other metals with it which can be damaging to river wildlife.



Sewage fungus

Sewage fungus can be tricky to identify. Often it looks slimy and grey, and cotton wool-like. It is often found downstream from a sewage outfall.



Silt

Silty water has lots of sediment in it and often appears brown, a bit like milky tea or hot chocolate. This type of pollution often happens after heavy rain or cattle/animals entering the water.



Run-off

Water containing run-off can look oily, blackish or have a rainbow sheen on the surface. Often this is washed off from roads and contains oil and brake and tyre residues that gets into rivers.



Livestock

Are there livestock in or that have access to the water? You may see cows or sheep that are able to enter the river, where they have potential to erode the bank, disturb the bottom and transfer faeces or chemicals into the water.



Algae

Algal blooms or scums can make the water look bright green or blue-green, and sometimes the water surface appears dirty and crusty. Some algae blooms can produce harmful toxins, and you and your pets should keep out of the water. You may also see filamentous algae which can look like stringy or slimy material under the water.

Our rivers face threats from many different pollutants, but understanding where and how bad the issues are is essential to create change.

Download the free Big River Watch app, spend 15 minutes by your local river, and use the simple survey to tell us what you see.



Images:

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If you think you've identified a serious pollution incident, you can report it:

England, Scotland, Northern Ireland: 0800 80 70 60

Wales: Natural Resources Wales hotline: 0300 065 3000

Ireland: EPA Headquarters: 053 916 0600 / Lo-Call Number: 1890 33 55 99*