THE OTTER NETWORK 2020 SPRING OTTER SURVEY

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2020

Results and report

Spring Otter Survey

RESULTS AND REPORT

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

Despite the Covid-19 pandemic, and the resulting lockdown regulations that have been in place since late March, the eighth Annual Spring Otter Survey run by the North East Otter Network took place over the weekend of the 25th/26th April 2020.

It must be said however that this was a slimmed down survey with many volunteer surveyors unable to access all or part of their survey patches or being in isolation and therefore not able to take part at all. The decision to go ahead was taken after much thought and consideration. Most of the training sessions had already taken place by the time lockdown came into effect and all participants were advised that they should only survey within their local area and to do so on foot. As a result, coverage was much patchier than usual and there were some areas that were barely surveyed at all.

However, those who were able to take part seemed to be delighted to be able to do something that felt 'normal'. Additionally, several people took on new patches in the areas they found themselves in during lockdown which provided some new insights into otter activity in the region. So, a huge thank you to everyone who was able to take part and for those who unfortunately could not, we hope to welcome you back next year.

For the first time since the Annual Spring Survey started in 2013 the weather was fine and dry across the whole survey area. I don't think anyone got wet during the whole weekend (correct me if I'm wrong) and some people were actually out in short sleeves! The very dry spring this year also meant that river levels were low, which was good for accessing bridges but not so good for finding tracks in silt and mud.

To everyone who took part but drew a blank I will repeat the mantra that although you may be disappointed not to find any otter signs, getting negative data really is just as important for our records as it tell us where otters are **not** active which helps to identify watercourses that do not provide adequate food resources or habitat and also allows us to pick up on fluctuations in the otter population.

There was one sighting of an otter on the Sunday afternoon and there was a trail camera capture on the Saturday night. There were also another couple of trail camera captures on the Friday night and the Monday night.

Over the weekend 84 volunteers, or teams of volunteers, managed to survey 85 patches containing 456 sites. This is of course well down on last year's number for obvious reasons. You will see from the map of patches surveyed that there is a gaping hole in the south-eastern part of the survey area. There are a couple of reasons for this. Firstly, Amy Carrick who used to recruit and liaise with volunteers in the Tees Valley has left Tees Valley Wildlife Trust and many of her volunteers did not re-register, so volunteer numbers in that area were already down before the arrival of Covid-19. Secondly, as many long-standing volunteers will know eastern County Durham is always a difficult area for recruitment. I put out a call every year for help with that area so any loss from lockdown was always going to have a greater impact on coverage there. However, given the circumstances I think what was achieved is quite impressive!

There were also over 300 records of other species recorded including plants, insects, birds, amphibians and mammals. Highlights are outlined in the table below the otter data.

Otter Data

Of the 456 sites checked 259 (57%) were positive for otter signs – this is a considerably higher percentage than usual and may be due to surveyors reducing the number of sites checked and concentrating on those that are known spraint sites. A further 11 sites had possible but inconclusive signs. There were 186 sites (41%) which were totally negative – this is obviously lower than in previous years in line with the above. There were of course many empty patches this year (112), but new patches were also added, it is difficult if not impossible therefore to make direct comparisons of these results with those of previous years. However, the important thing is that we have data on where otters were active this year which will be helpful for next year's survey.

There were 48 Day 2 'hits' (fresh signs) and as usual, many of these 'hits' were located close together in the same or neighbouring patches and so have been adjudicated as belonging to a single territory. There were nine sites/patches where fresh deposits were found on Day 1 but nothing new was discovered on Day 2. These fresh signs on the Saturday were sufficiently isolated from the next nearest 'hit' to allow us to be reasonably confident that we were just not looking in the right place on the Sunday. The nine sites/patches in question have therefore been adjudicated as 'Near Miss' otter territories. There were also the two trail camera captures in the days either side of the survey weekend both of which were in

areas that had not been surveyed and were isolated from the next nearest 'hit' site. These have therefore been classified as 'Reasonable Suspicion' otters.

Those of you who have taken part in the survey before, and have therefore read these reports, know that I always err on the side of caution when allocating 'hits' to territories and will conservatively lump fresh signs together into one territory if they are within a 5km stretch of watercourse rather than splitting them into two.

For those unfamiliar with the way the data are analysed it is important to emphasise that we are counting otter territories here **not** individual animals (with the exception of visuals and trail cameras). It is reasonable to assume therefore that at least some of the adjudicated territories will contain females with cubs meaning the number of actual otters will be greater than the number of territories. This really is the only way of getting any kind of numerical data when surveying for otters which are an elusive, wide-ranging, cryptic animal with no easily identifiable markings.

You will see in the results table that the number of estimated territories this year is 31. This is obviously well down on last year and is low compared with most years except 2013, which was the first year the survey took place. Because of the exceptional circumstances surrounding this year's survey and the resulting gaps in coverage it is probably safest to view this as an outlier in our dataset.

Other species

A total of 107 species of birds, mammals, amphibians, fish, insects and plants were recorded in addition to otter signs this year. This is also down on last year, but almost certainly for the same reasons.

To pick out a few, there were 13 records of mink scat/tracks, 5 roe deer sightings, 1 badger visual, 2 cuckoo sightings, 17 dipper visuals – several being of nesting pairs - and 2 kingfishers.

Maps and tables displaying the data are displayed on the following pages. If anyone would like to ask any questions please contact me through the Otter Network at otters.northeast@gmail.com

Acknowledgements

Environmental Records Information Centre North East

Last but by no means least, huge thanks to ERIC North East for once again supporting the survey from their Small Grants Fund!

Maps, Tables & Charts

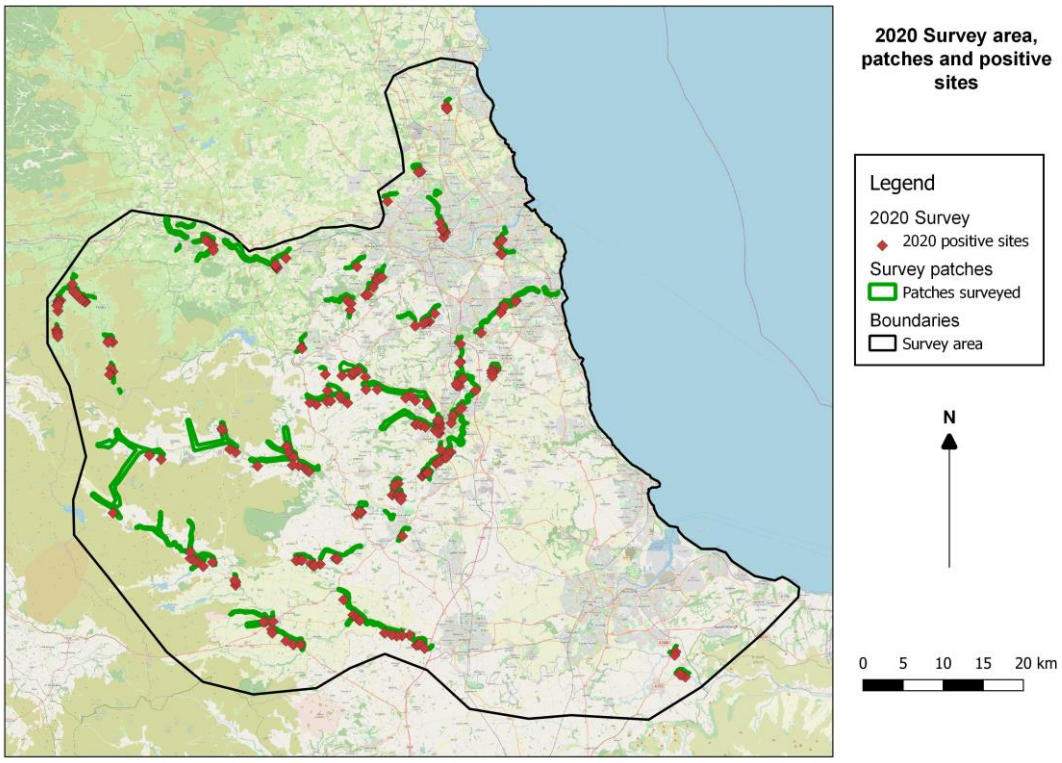

Figure 1. Map showing surveyed patches and all positive sites in 2020 survey

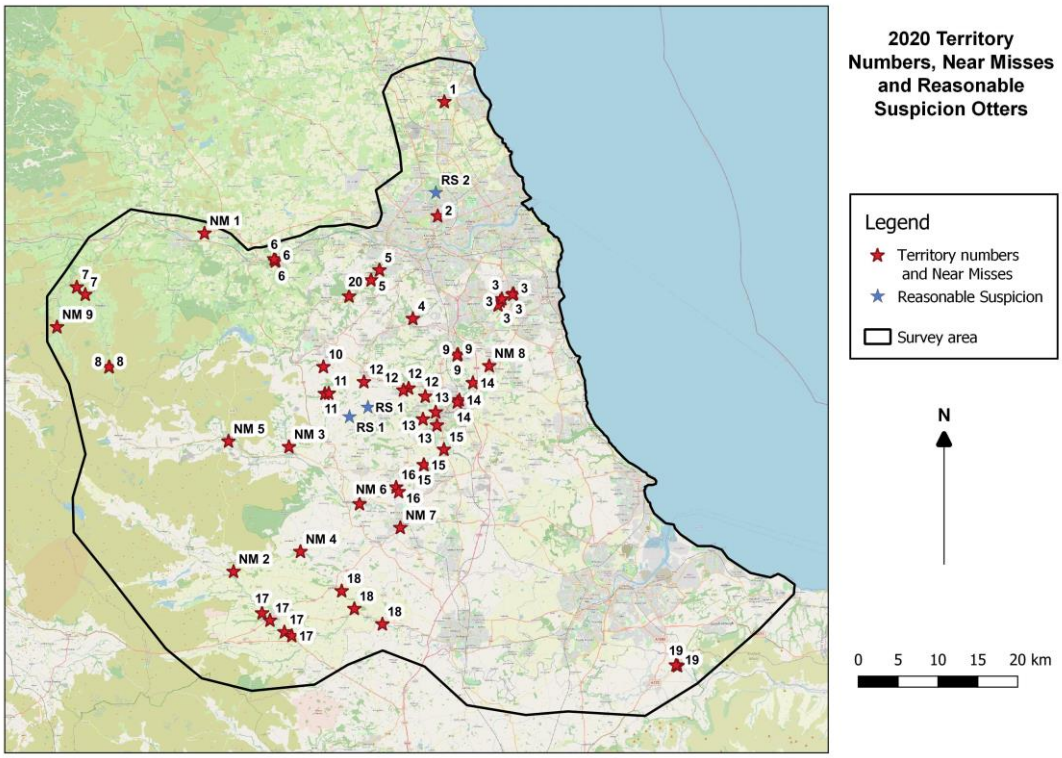

Figure 2. Map showing Day 2 'hits' with adjudicated territory numbers, 'near misses' and 'reasonable suspicion' otters.

Table 1. 2020 Otter survey data

Catchment	Patches	Sites	Negative sites	Positive sites (possible)	Hits	NM & RS	Territories
Blyth	1	3	0	3	1	-	1
Castle Eden Burn	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Derwent/Tyne	5	21	8	13	3		2
Hawthorn Burn							
Tees	15	68	24	38(6)	9	1	3
Tyne/South Tyne	25	155	77	73(5)	8	2	4
Wansbeck	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Wear	39	209	77	132	27	6	10
Totals	**85**	**456**	**186**	**259(11)**	**48**	**9**	**20**

Table 2. 2020 Summary

Surveyed patches	87
Empty patches	112
Otter territories located	20
Reasonable suspicion/near misses	11
Total Adjudicated territories	**31**

Table 3. All surveys summary

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Patches	93	100	112	119	115	94	123	87
Total sites	517	588	608	644	629	516	681	456
Sites positive	216	212	260	281	272	224	281	259
% sites positive	42	36	42	44	43	43	41	57
% sites negative	56	60	53	53	54	53	56	41
Hits	59	67	56	78	70	55	82	48
Located territories	26	29	27	30	32	24	39	20
NM/RS	3	6	9	5	6	5	8	11
Adjudicated territories	29	35	36	35	37	29	47	31
Adjudicated territories old survey area (VC 66)							**40**	

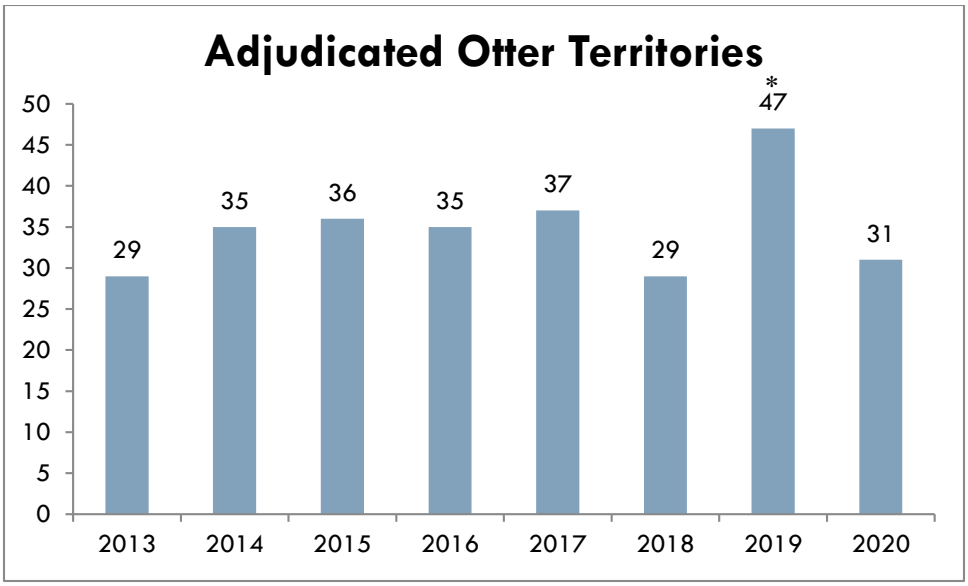

Figure 3. Adjudicated otter territories in eight annual surveys.
* Survey conducted over larger area than previous years

Other Species Records

	Species	No of Records*
Birds	Avocet	1
	Blackbird	7
	Blackcap	5
	Blue Tit	4
	Bullfinch	1
	Buzzard	4
	Carrion Crow	2
	Chaffinch	3
	Chiffchaff	8
	Coal Tit	3
	Common Sandpiper	7
	Common Fern	1
	Cuckoo	2
	Curlew	6
	Dipper	17
	Dunnock	2
	Goldfinch	3
	Goosander	5

	Great-Spotted Woodpecker	2
	Great Tit	7
	Green Woodpecker	1
	Greenfinch	2
	Grey Heron	10
	Grey Wagtail	7
	Greylag Goose	5
	House Sparrow	2
	Jackdaw	2
	Kestrel	1
	Kingfisher	2
	Lapwing	3
	Linnet	1
	Little Owl	1
	Long-tailed Tit	2
	Magpie	2
	Mallard	15
	Mandarin Duck	2
	Meadow Pipit	1
	Mute Swan	2
	Nuthatch	2
	Oystercatcher	8
	Pied Wagtail	4
	Red Grouse	1
	Redshank	1
	Redstart	1
	Reed Bunting	2
	Reed Warbler	1
	Robin	4
	Sand Martin	2
	Sedge Warbler	1
	Skylark	2
	Snipe	3
	Song Thrush	2
	Sparrowhawk	1
	Swallow	3
	Tawny Owl	3
	Teal	1

	Treecreeper	2
	Tufted Duck	1
	Willow Warbler	7
	Wren	10
Mammals	Badger (tracks/setts/latrine)	1
	Badger (visual)	1
	Brown Rat	1
	Deer (tracks/latrine)	3
	Grey Squirrel (visual)	6
	Mink (tracks/scat)	13
	Mole (diggings)	1
	Rabbit (visual)	2
	Red Fox (tracks/scat)	1
	Roe Deer (visual)	5
	Stoat (visual)	1
	Water Vole (latrine/feeding remains)	1
	Water Vole (visual)	2
Amphibian	Toad (spawn)	1
	Toad/Toad tadpole (visual)	2
	Smooth Newt (visual)	1
Insects	Green Hairstreak butterfly	1
	Green-veined White butterfly	1
	Orange Tip butterfly	5
	Peacock butterfly	1
	Small Tortoiseshell butterfly	4
	Speckled Wood butterfly	2
Plant	Bluebell	1
	Butterbur	1
	Colt's Foot	1
	Comfrey	1
	Cowslip	1
	Dog Violet	1
	Dog's Mercury	1
	Forget-me-not	1
	Globe Flower	1
	Golden Saxifrage	1
	Kingcup	1
	Lesser Celandine	1

	Primrose	1
	Ramsons	2
	Red Campion	1
	Wood Anemone	2
	Wood Sorrel	1
* **Number of records not number of individuals**		