



THE OTTER NETWORK 2019 SPRING OTTER SURVEY



Photo © John Buxton

2019

Results and report

Spring Otter Survey

RESULTS AND REPORT

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

The seventh Annual Spring Otter Survey run by the North East Otter Network took place over the weekend of the 27th/28th April 2019 and this year was bigger and better than ever. So firstly a huge thank you to everyone who took part, both long-standing and new volunteers. Numbers of participants and patches covered were both up on last year and we have extended our survey area north to Ashington and west into the Allen Valleys. Thanks once more to Tees Valley Wildlife Trust for taking part allowing us to continue to monitor the otter population in the Tees Valley.

As is often the case the weather played its part in the survey with Storm Hannah sweeping across the western side of the country on Friday/Saturday creating very wet conditions for surveyors in the North Pennines and causing water levels to rise markedly further downstream on several watercourses. This will certainly have resulted in some overnight signs on Sunday morning being submerged or washed away, but it doesn't appear to have affected the overall tally of active territories which is the highest yet – albeit over a larger area.

Feedback from volunteers suggests that everyone enjoyed their two days of otter surveying regardless of whether they found any signs or not. I say it every year, but it really is just as important to get information on where otters are **not** being found as to record where they are. This is so that we can identify watercourses that do not provide adequate food resources or habitat and pick up on fluctuations in the otter population. One lucky person saw a female with a cub when out doing their survey on the Sunday morning and there was a sighting elsewhere of three otters on the Sunday afternoon. There were also two trail camera captures.

Over the weekend 118 teams of volunteers checked a patch of watercourse amounting to over 145 people in total. Several dedicated volunteers once again took on more than one patch, but there were also several late drop-outs due to unforeseen circumstances. However, we continue to get good coverage throughout the area and the total number of patches surveyed this year was 123 with the number of sites checked an impressive 681.

This is the most patches/sites we have ever covered by some margin and I am delighted that we have more than recovered from last year's lower numbers - even accounting for the fact that we have expanded the survey area. The number of empty patches this year was 60.

As always, there was an impressive by-catch of other species recorded covering plants, insects, birds, amphibians and mammals. Highlights are outlined in the table below the otter data.

Otter Data

Of the 681 sites checked 281 (41%) were positive for otter signs which is a similar percentage to previous years and is remarkably consistent across all seven surveys. A further 18 sites had possible but inconclusive signs. There were 382 sites (56%) which were totally negative – this again is in line with previous years. As I always explain, it may sound a lot, but it gives us confidence that we are looking in enough places as there remain more sites where there are no otters than sites where we find evidence of otter activity. It is unlikely therefore that we are overlooking many. However, there was still a fairly large number of empty patches and the weather conditions over the survey weekend mean we will have missed some.

There were 82 Day 2 'hits' (fresh signs) which is our largest tally yet, but with the expanded survey area this is not surprising. As usual, many of these 'hits' were close together in the same or neighbouring patches and so have been adjudicated to belong to a single territory. There were five patches where fresh deposits were found on Day 1 but nothing new was discovered on Day 2 and that were sufficiently isolated from the next nearest 'hit' to allow us to be fairly confident that we were just not looking in the right place on the Sunday. So, these have been adjudicated as 'Near Miss' otter territories. There were also three otter sightings or trail camera captures in the days immediately before and after the survey weekend in areas where fresh signs were not found on Sunday. These areas were also isolated from the next nearest 'hit' site and so have been classified as a 'Reasonable Suspicion' otter.

I always err on the side of caution when allocating 'hits' to territories and 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. 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 47. This is obviously a considerable increase on previous years and is mostly accounted for by the larger area surveyed. However, after taking out the territories identified in the new survey areas it still leaves a total of 40 in the original Vice County 66 Durham area which is the highest number we have identified.

Other species

A total of 153 species of birds, mammals, amphibians, insects and plants were recorded in addition to otter signs this year! This is by some margin the highest tally yet.

There were no very unusual sightings, but species that we have highlighted in the past such as Avocets are now appearing regularly – this year's count was 8 birds. There were 40 dipper records and many of those were for pairs of birds or families and also included 5 definite nest sites. There were however fewer numbers of swallows, swifts and other long-distance migrants recorded this year as they mostly arrived later than usual due to the severe weather conditions on the migration routes in the spring.

For mammals, there were 17 records of mink scat/tracks which is similar to last year. There were 11 roe deer sightings plus another 16 records of tracks, 13 fox records including one visual but only one record of badger signs which is quite unusual.

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

Maps, Tables & Charts

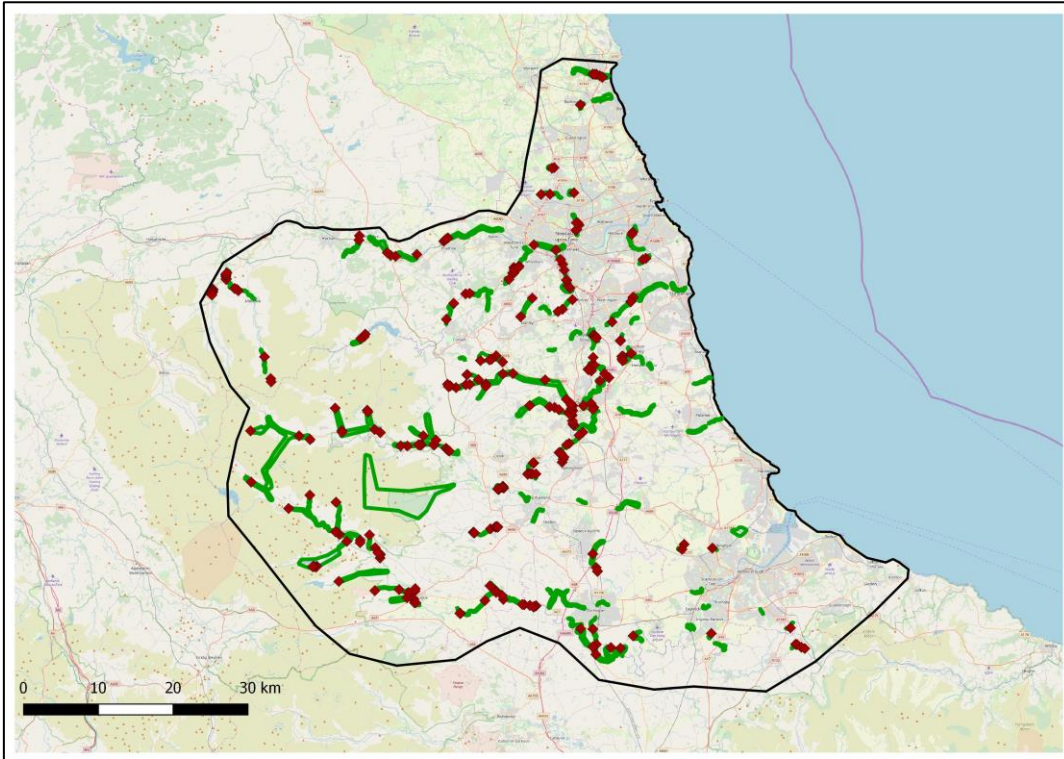


Figure 1. Map showing surveyed patches and all positive sites in 2019 survey

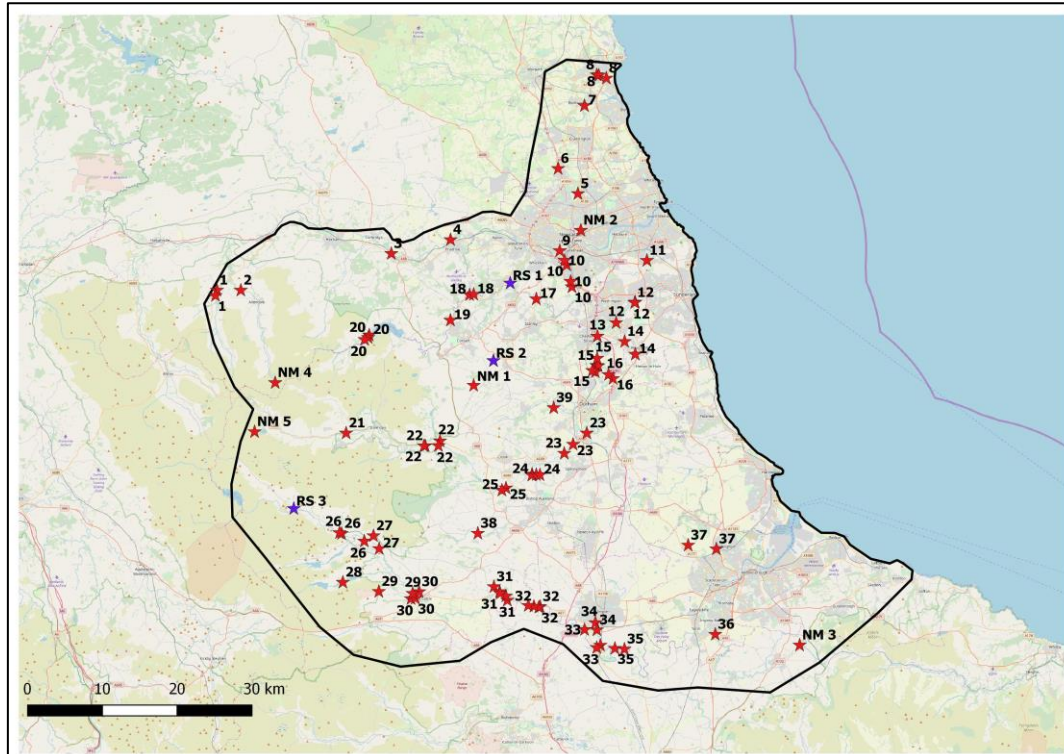


Figure 2. Map showing Day 2 'hits' with adjudicated territory numbers, 'near misses' and 'reasonable suspicion' otters.

Table 1. 2019 Otter survey data

Catchment	Patches	Sites	Negative sites	Positives (possibles)	Hits	NM & RS	Territories
Blyth	2	9	8	1	1	0	1
Castle Eden Burn	2	14	14	0	0	0	0
Derwent/Tyne	7	35	18	17	6	1	4
Hawthorn Burn	1	1	1	0	0	0	0
Tees	37	188	114	68 (6)	30	2	12
Tyne	26	138	73	57(6)	13	2	8
Wansbeck	1	7	0	7	3	0	1
Wear	48	289	154	131(4)	29	3	13
Totals	124*	681	382	281 (16)	82	8	39

*One patch had sites in both Tees & Wear catchments

Table 2. 2019 Summary

Empty patches	60
Otter territories located	39
Reasonable suspicion/near misses	8
Total Adjudicated territories	47

Table 3. All surveys summary

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

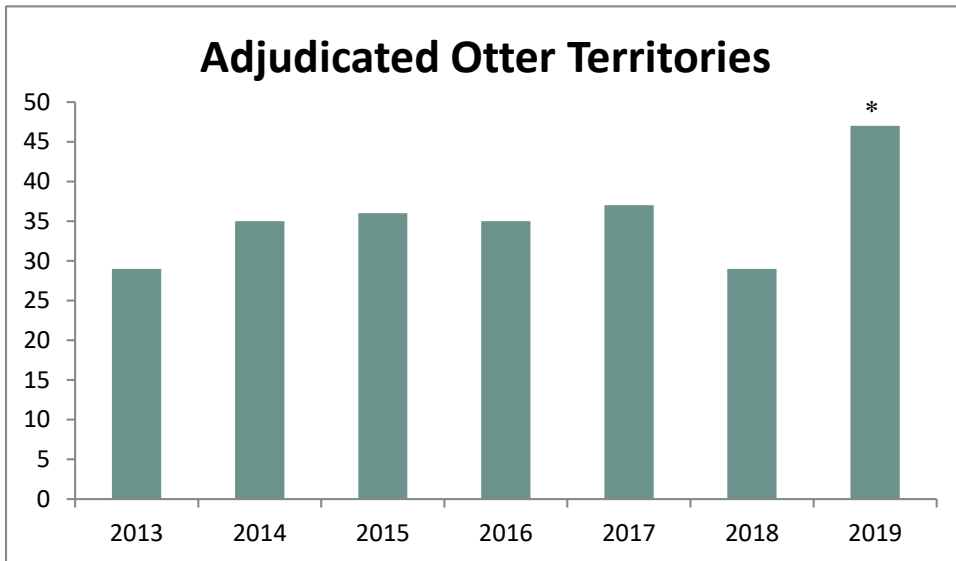


Figure 3. Adjudicated otter territories in seven annual surveys.

* Survey conducted over larger area than previous years

Other Species

	Species	No of Records*
Birds	Avocet	2
	Barn owl	1
	Blackcap	12
	Black grouse	1
	Buzzard	10
	Chiffchaff	18
	Common sandpiper	11
	Common tern	1
	Cormorant	7
	Cuckoo	3
	Curlew	8
	Dipper	40
	Dunlin	1
	Eider	2
	Goosander	16
	Great crested grebe	1
	Great spotted woodpecker	9
Green woodpecker	3	
Grey heron	24	

	Grey wagtail	18
	House martin	3
	Jay	4
	Kestrel	5
	Kingfisher	11
	Lapwing	8
	Mandarin duck	3
	Mistle thrush	4
	Mute swan	8
	Oystercatcher	13
	Pied wagtail	6
	Reed bunting	4
	Sand martin	12
	Shelduck	6
	Skylark	6
	Snipe	3
	Song thrush	7
	Sparrow hawk	3
	Swallow	8
	Swift	2
	Tawny owl	3
	Teal	1
	Treecreeper	7
	Whitethroat	3
	Willow warbler	10
	Yellowhammer	1
Mammals	Badger (tracks/setts/latrine)	1
	Brown hare	6
	Deer (tracks/droppings)	16
	Mink (tracks/scat)	17
	Roe deer (visual)	11
	Red Fox (tracks/scat)	12
	Red Fox (visual)	1
	Stoat	2
	Water vole (latrine/burrows)	3
	Weasel	1
Amphibian	Frog (tadpoles)	1
	Toad	1

Spring Otter Survey

Insects	Comma butterfly	1
	Green-veined white butterfly	2
	Meadow brown butterfly	1
	Orange tip butterfly	9
	Peacock butterfly	1
	Small tortoiseshell butterfly	4
	Speckled wood butterfly	3
Plant	Dog violet	1
	Dog's mercury	1
	Giant hogweed	1
	Japanese knotweed	2
	Water crowfoot	1
* Records not number of individuals		