

## 2018 Otter Network Spring Otter Survey Report

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### Summary of Results

The sixth Annual Spring Otter Survey, now run by the North East Otter Network [www.theotternetwork.co.uk](http://www.theotternetwork.co.uk), took place over the weekend of the 28<sup>th</sup>/29<sup>th</sup> April 2018 and the first thing to say is a huge thank you to everyone who took part, both long-standing and new volunteers. Transferring the survey to the Otter Network provided some new challenges and we had no way of knowing how many people would stick with it. I am delighted to say that many did and although volunteer numbers were slightly down on recent years I am confident we can build them back up again. Thanks once more also go to Tees Valley Wildlife Trust who took part in the survey for the fourth successive year allowing us to continue to monitor the otter population in the Tees Valley.

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. Once again we had a clutch of visuals of otters over the survey weekend – four this year – plus two trail camera captures either side of the weekend.

The weather over the survey weekend was pretty good in most places although temperatures were quite low for the end of April. However, weather conditions over the past year have certainly been challenging for all our wildlife and otters are no exception. The excessively wet, cold and snowy winter and early spring is likely to have impacted on survival rates for cubs and juveniles and this is reflected in the number of adjudicated territories in this year's survey.

Over the weekend 89 teams of volunteers checked a patch of watercourse amounting to over 100 people in total. Again, we are grateful to the dedicated volunteers who took on a second patch to help cover the reduction in volunteer numbers. Thanks to these dedicated otter spotters the total number of patches covered this year was 94. This takes us back to the number of patches covered in 2013 which was the first year the survey was run and we

will have to work hard to get numbers back up next year. The number of sites contained in those patches was 516. There were 68 empty patches this year, which is much higher than usual, and reflects the reduction in volunteer numbers.

As always, there was an impressive by-catch of other species recorded ranging from marsh marigold to a common seal. Highlights are outlined in the table below the otter data.

## **Otters**

Of the 516 sites checked 224 (43%) were positive for otter signs which is the same percentage as last year and is remarkably consistent across all six surveys. A further 17 sites had possible or inconclusive signs. There were 288 sites (53%) which were totally negative – this again is in line with previous years. As I always explain, this 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, the large number of empty patches this year does mean we are likely to have missed some.

There were 55 Day 2 ‘hits’ (fresh signs) which is also down on last year and this is almost certainly a result of the reduced number of patches surveyed. 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.

I always err on the side of caution when allocating ‘hits’ to territories and have conservatively lumped fresh signs together into one territory if they are quite close together 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 individually identifiable markings.

You will see in the results table below that the number of estimated territories this year is 29. This is a reduction from previous years and is back to the number estimated in the first survey in 2013. The large number of empty patches will almost certainly have contributed to this and we can only speculate as to the impact of the harsh weather conditions over the winter. We will need to keep an eye on this next year and we will be working hard to recruit new volunteers to fill the gaps. If you have friends or colleagues who you think may be interested in taking part next year, please ask them to get in touch.

### **Other species**

A total of 78 species of birds, mammals, amphibians, insects and plants were recorded in addition to otter signs this year.

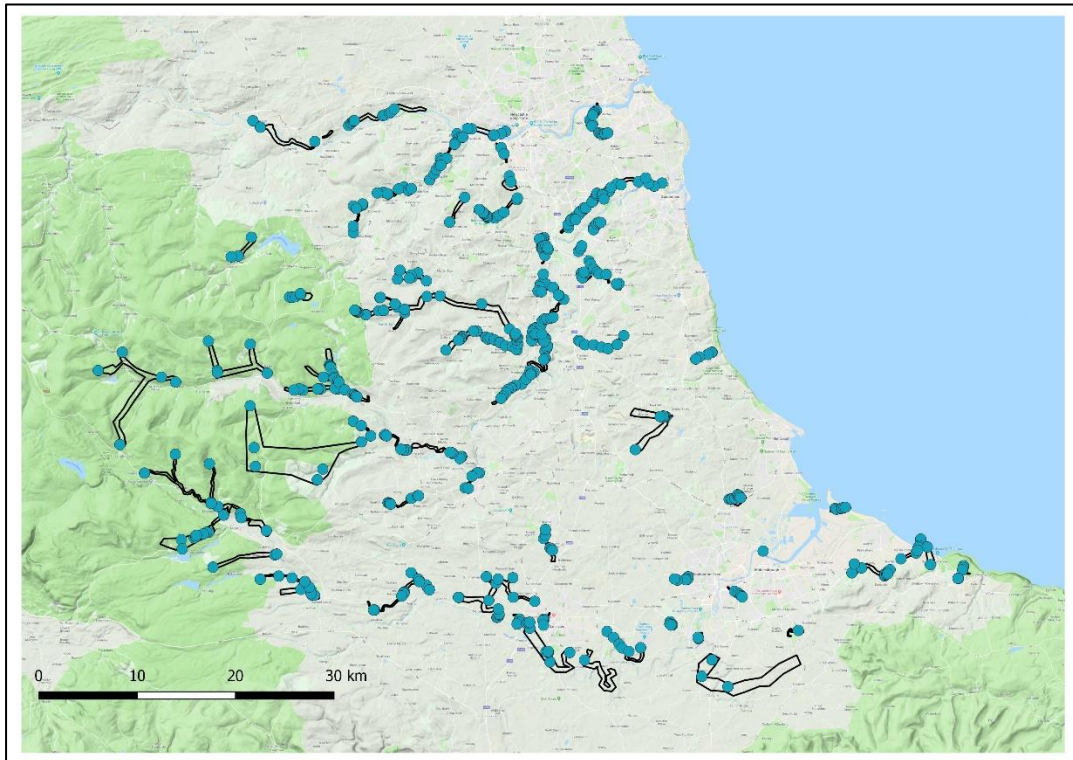
The stand out sighting this year was a Nightjar – a very rare bird to see. Avocets were on the list for the second time with 30 birds being recorded over the two days – a large increase on 2017. There were approx.18 dippers seen plus 4 nests. However, in general bird records were down on previous years and butterflies were in very short supply due to the late spring.

For mammals, there was another common seal seen on the Wear in the Washington area this year. Records of mink tracks were down this year but there were two trail camera captures over the weekend. The reports of deer tracks/visuals were also down with 18 records including sightings of 10 live animals and one dead on a road. There were 7 records of fox sign/sightings and visuals of 4 live brown hares and one dead.

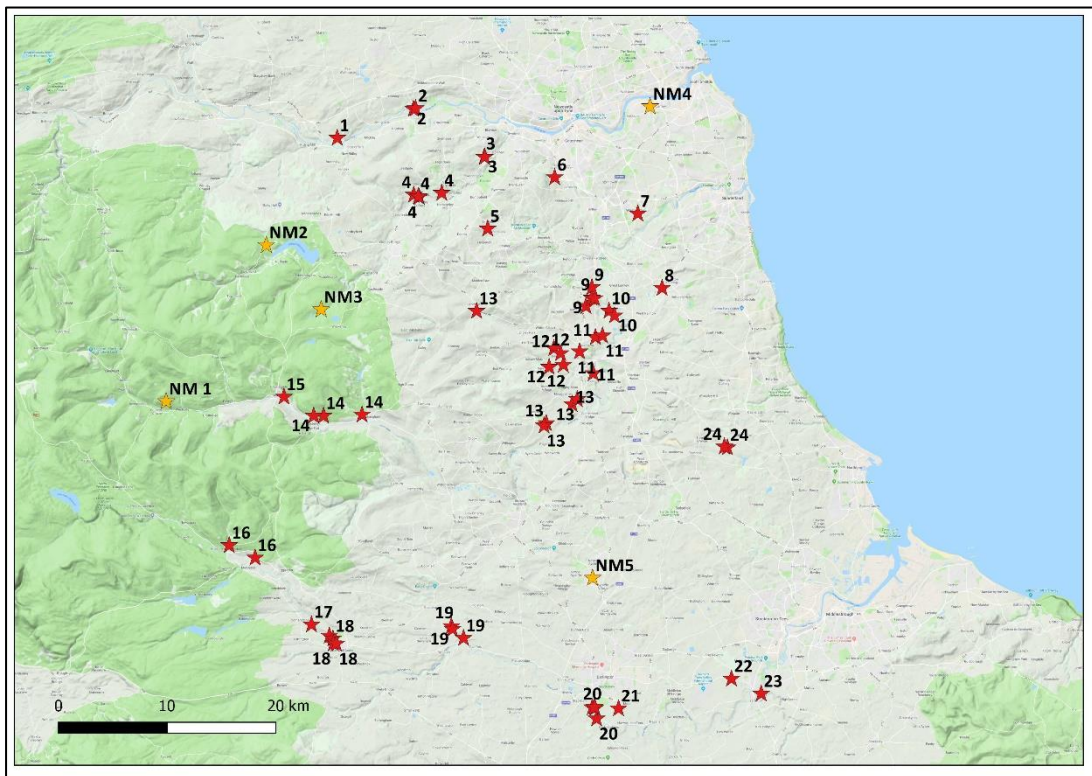
Maps and tables displaying the data are displayed on the following pages. If anyone would like to ask any questions please contact me through the Otter Network at

[otters.northeast@gmail.com](mailto:otters.northeast@gmail.com)

## Maps, tables and charts



**Figure 1.** Map showing positive records and surveyed patches from 2018 survey



**Figure 2.** Map showing Day 2 'hits' with adjudicated territories plus 'near miss' territories from 2018 survey

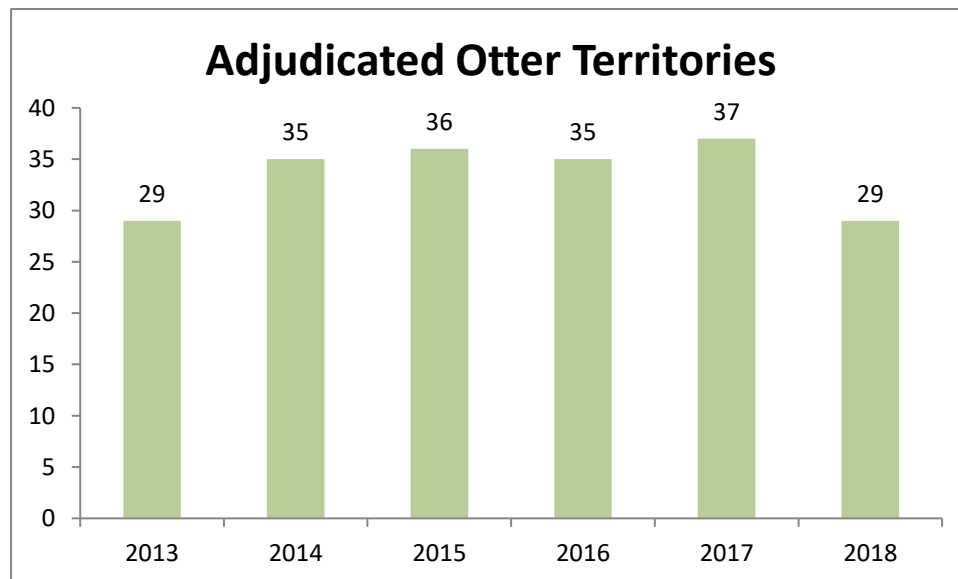
**Table 1. 2018 Otter Survey data**

Catchment	Patches	Sites	Negative sites	Positives (possibles)	Hits	Near miss and reasonable suspicion	Otter territories
Tees	32	161	96 (60%)	59 (6)	19	1	9
Tyne	16	85	44 (52%)	39 (2)	10	2	5
Wear	46	265	129 (49%)	126 (9)	26	2	10
Castle Eden Dene	1	5	5	0	0	0	0
<b>Totals</b>	<b>94*</b>	<b>516</b>	<b>274 (53%)</b>	<b>224 (17)</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>24</b>

\*1 patch had sites in both Tees and Wear catchments

<b>2018 Summary</b>	
Empty patches	68
Otter territories located	24
Reasonable suspicion/ near misses	6
<b>Total adjudicated territories</b>	<b>29</b>

	<b>Table 2. All Surveys Summary</b>					
	<b>2013</b>	<b>2014</b>	<b>2015</b>	<b>2016</b>	<b>2017</b>	<b>2018</b>
<b>Patches</b>	93	100	112	119	114	94
<b>Total sites</b>	517	588	608	644	629	516
<b>Sites positive</b>	216	212	260	281	272	224
<b>% sites positive</b>	42	36	43	44	43	43
<b>% sites negative</b>	56	60	53	53	54	53
<b>'Hits'</b>	59	67	56	78	70	55
<b>Located territories</b>	26	29	27	30	32	24
<b>Near misses/Reasonable suspicion</b>	3	6	9	5	5	5
<b>Adjudicated territories</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>29</b>



**Figure 3.** Adjudicated otter territories identified in six Spring Otter Surveys

**Table 3. Selection of other species recorded**

	<b>Species</b>	<b>No of Records*</b>
<b>Birds</b>	Avocet	2
	Barn owl	2
	Blackcap	5
	Black grouse	1
	Buzzard	2
	Chiffchaff	3
	Common sandpiper	4
	Common tern	2
	Cormorant	3
	Cuckoo	4
	Curlew	9
	Dipper	14
	Dunlin	1
	Eider duck	1
	Goosander	8
	Great crested grebe	1
	Great spotted woodpecker	7
	Green woodpecker	1
	Grey heron	19
	Grey wagtail	4
	House martin	1
	Jay	2
	Kestrel	5
	Kingfisher	7
	Lapwing	4
	Little ringed plover	1
	Mandarin duck	2
	Meadow pipit	1
	Mistle thrush	1
	Mute swan	6
	Nightjar	1
	Oystercatcher	15
	Pied wagtail	4
	Red grouse	2
	Redshank	1
	Reed bunting	2

	Rook	1
	Sand martin	5
	Shelduck	1
	Skylark	2
	Swallow	8
	Teal	1
	Whitethroat	1
	Willow warbler	6
	Woodcock	1
	Yellowhammer	1
<b>Mammals</b>	Badger (tracks/setts/latrine)	6
	Brown hare	2
	Common seal	1
	Deer (tracks/droppings)	11
	Grey squirrel	1
	Mink (tracks/scat)	13
	Mink (visual)	2
	Rabbit	4
	Roe deer (visual)	7
	Red Fox (tracks/scat)	6
	Red Fox (visual)	1
	Water vole (latrine/burrows)	3
	Weasel	2
<b>Amphibian</b>	Frog (tadpoles)	1
<b>Insects</b>	Comma butterfly	1
	Small tortoiseshell butterfly	1
	7-spot ladybird	1
<b>Plant</b>	Dog violet	1
	Cowslip	1
	Marsh marigold	1
	Japanese knotweed	1
<b>* Records not number of individuals</b>		