

2015 DWT Otter Survey

Summary of Results

The third DWT Spring Otter Survey took place over the weekend of the 25th/26th April 2015, many thanks and congratulations to all the volunteers who took part, and a special thank you to Amy Carrick of Tees Valley Wildlife Trust for organising TVWT's participation for the first time which extended our coverage of the Tees Valley. The event was a great success again and everyone who took part contributed to that regardless of whether they found evidence of otters or not.

We were mostly very lucky with the weather this year, the forecast had been dreadful but in the end for most places it was generally dry with some showers on Saturday afternoon and evening.

More than 130 people were out surveying over the weekend and we covered 112 patches (12 more than last year) containing 608 sites (20 more than 2014). There were 15 empty patches, due to late drop-outs because of illness and a shortage of volunteers in the north and east of the county, so again we have a few gaps in our coverage, but still a remarkable effort. The by-catch of other species reported was also impressive this year and the results of those sightings are shown in the table below the otter data.

Otters

Of the 608 sites checked 260 (43%) were positive for otter signs which is up on last year (given the atrocious weather in much of the County over the weekend of the 2014 survey this is not that surprising). A further 27 had possible or inconclusive signs. There were 321 sites (53%) which were totally negative. This may sound a lot, but it gives us confidence that we are looking in enough places as there are still 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, although there are still gaps in our coverage particularly along the coast, on the Tyne and in the uplands. There were 56 Day 2 'hits' (fresh signs) which interestingly is down on last year. Many of these 'hits' were close together in the same or neighbouring patches and so, as usual, have been adjudicated as a single territory. There were seven patches where very fresh deposits were found on Day 1 but nothing new was discovered on Day 2, and were sufficiently isolated from the next nearest 'hit' for us to be reasonably confident that we were just not looking in the right place on the Sunday. These have been adjudicated as 'Near Miss'

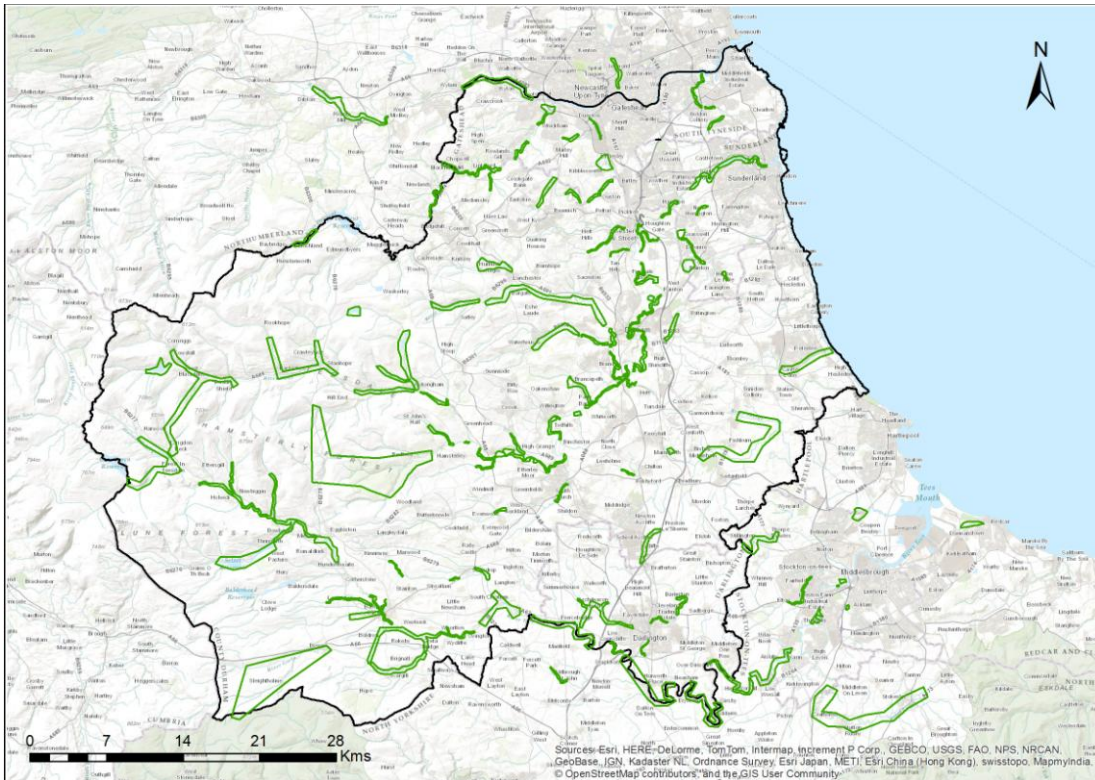
otter territories. There were also two very recent sightings of otters in areas where there was either no fresh spraint found or we did not have a surveyor. These have been classified as 'Reasonable Suspicion' otters. As in previous years I have been conservative in allocating the territories and have tended to lump fresh signs together into one territory rather than split them into two if they are quite close together.

As usual, it is important to emphasise that we are counting otter territories here not individual animals. It is reasonable to assume therefore that many of the adjudicated territories will contain females with cubs which means the number of actual otters will be greater than the number of territories. This is as accurate as we can be when surveying for an elusive, wide-ranging, cryptic animal that has no individually identifiable markings.

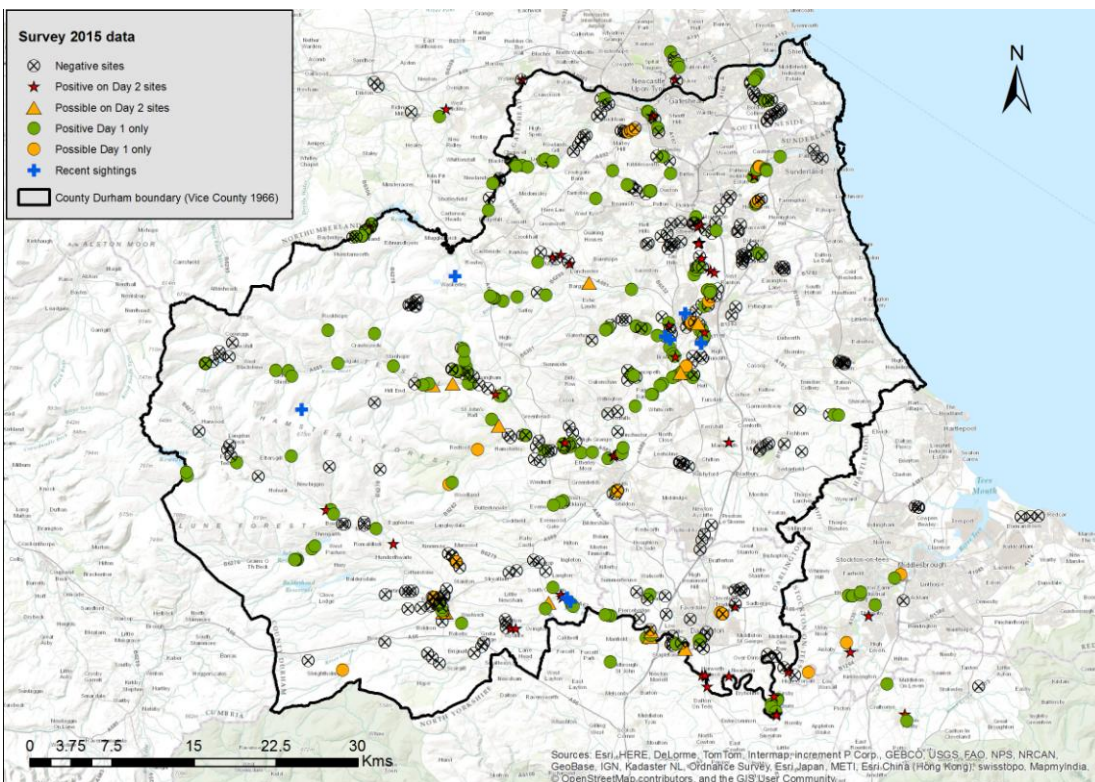
You will see in the results table below that the number of estimated territories this year is 36. This is one more than last year, but we were surveying over a wider area. The fact that after three years of surveying we seem to be getting reasonably consistent results is encouraging and gives us some confidence that we are getting it about right. However, the large number of negative sites does suggest that the otter has not yet returned to all our watercourses and that there might be factors inhibiting their full recovery. Of course we do not know what the carrying capacity for otters is in our region.

Other species

We had a bumper crop of sightings of other species with the number of species recorded up from 36 last year to an impressive 57 this year! The dipper count rose again, green woodpeckers made their first appearance in the list and there was even a sighting of a red squirrel. Overall mammal sightings were up on last year with deer tracks/visuals at 21 compared to 17 last year and 18 in 2013. There were two hedgehog sightings, one on a camera trap and, unfortunately, one dead that looked as if it had been predated. However, more worryingly there was also an increase in sightings of mink scat and tracks. This is something we need to keep an eye on as, originally, there were signs that the otter's return was suppressing the mink population, but it is possible that they may now be learning to coexist.



Map showing patches surveyed in 2015



Map showing all data points from 2015 survey

Otter data

Catchment	Patches	Sites	Negative sites	Positives (possibles)	Hits	Near miss/reasonable suspicion	Otter territories
Tees	39	184	99	73 (12)	21	1	11
Tyne	17	117	66	48 (3)	8	1	5
Wear	55	301	150	139 (12)	27	7	11
Castle Eden Burn	1	6	6	0	0	0	0
Hawthorn Burn	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Totals	112*	608	321	260 (27)	56	9	27

*1 patch had sites in both Tees and Wear catchments

Empty patches	15
Otter territories located	27
Reasonable suspicion/ near misses	9
Total adjudicated territories	36

	Surveys Summary		
	April 2013	April 2014	April 2015
Patches	93	100	112
Total sites	517	588	608
Sites positive	216	212	260
% sites positive	42	36	43
% sites negative	56	60	53
'Hits'	59	67	56
Located territories	26	29	27
Near misses/Reasonable suspicion	3	6	9
Adjudicated territories	29	35	36

By-catch of other species

	Species	Number
Birds	Blackcap	3
	Buzzard	5
	Chiffchaff	3
	Common sandpiper	7+
	Cormorant	2
	Curlew	5+
	Dipper	25+
	Goldcrest	2
	Goosander	69
	Great spotted woodpecker	7
	Green woodpecker	2
	Grey heron	23
	Grey wagtail	21+
	Greylag geese	10+
	House martins	Many
	Jay	1
	Kestrel	1
	Kingfisher	6
	Lapwing	6+
	Linnet	2
	Little owl	1
	Little ringed plover	3
	Mandarin duck	5
	Mistle thrush	1
	Nuthatch	1
	Oystercatcher	14+
	Pied wagtail	3
	Redstart	1
	Rookery	1
	Sand martin	30+
	Shelduck	1
	Snipe	1
	Song thrush	1
	Sparrow hawk	1
	Swallows	Many
	Tawny owl	1

	Tree creeper	1
	Whitethroat	1
	Willow tit	1
	Willow warbler	4
	Woodcock	1
	Wren	1
	Yellow wagtail	2
Mammals	Badger (visual)	1 (dead)
	Badger (tracks/setts/latrine)	4
	Brown rat	2
	Common shrew	1 (dead)
	Deer (tracks)	11
	Hedgehog	2
	Mink (tracks/scat)	18
	Roe deer (visual)	10
	Red Fox (tracks/scat)	6
	Red squirrel	1
	Water vole visual	4
	Water vole (latrine/burrows)	3
	Weasel	1
Insects	Orange tip butterfly	6
	Peacock butterfly	1
	Speckled wood butterfly	1
Species Total		57