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1. Results of recent survey work

1.1 Northumberland

While Vivien Kent ran the Durham Wildlife Trust two-day April survey event, a small number of volunteers were out across Northumberland and Cumbria.

Given the weather forecast, some of the Northumberland Team focussed on investigating areas where previous surveys had failed to suggest the presence of otter. We had great success and found otter in previously unreported locations from the Tyne, Allen and Rede as well as burns around Elsdon, Blanchland, Otterburn and Allenheads. No records were found around the Gunnerton area or along the West Allen. If anyone has any records from these areas, please let us know.

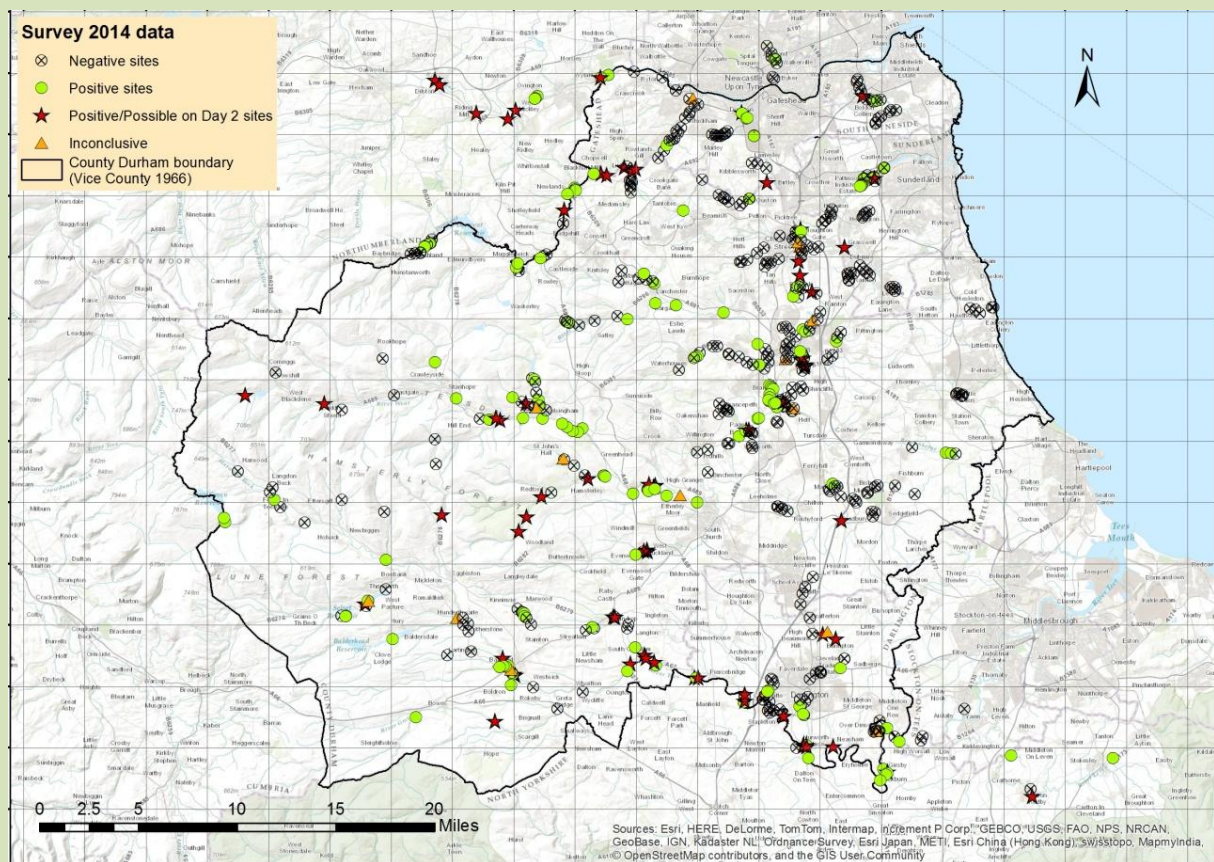
1.2 Durham

Weather had a major impact on the Durham survey. In some areas it was so bad that volunteers were unable to complete their survey on the Sunday due to the dangerous conditions of the banks and watercourses. Inevitably, the rain and rising water levels will have washed away or covered some signs so because of this we can again be reasonably sure that our results are on the low side.

120 volunteers braved the conditions to survey 100 patches (7 more than last year) containing 588 sites (71 more than last year).

Of the 588 sites checked 212 (36%) were positive for otter signs. This is slightly down on last year's percentage of 42%. A further 20 were recorded as having possible, but inconclusive, signs. There were 67 Day 2 'hits' (fresh signs) which is 32% of the total number of positive sites – a slight increase on last year. Extrapolating the data using the hit rate and various factors such as distance to other watercourses means a rough and ready estimate of the number of territories across the survey area can be made.

The results show that the number of estimated territories has increased from 29 last year to 35 this year which is probably the result of the increased number of patches surveyed. It will in any case take three or four years of surveys for the data to level out, but the fact that we have a number this year which is reasonably close to that of 2013, despite the dreadful conditions, is very encouraging.



Map showing all data from 2014 DWT otter survey.

A link to the full report is provided on the website.

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2. Events

2.1 *Otter watching with Debs*

Two of our most prolific recorders are Deborah, David S and David F. Debs has regular sightings of otter in a reasonably easy to access location with regular human traffic. We are planning to arrange 2-4 trips to this location in the Gainford area, west of Darlington. We have a numbers limit of 3 members per visit + Debs and one of The Otter Network Board. If you are interested, please email me by the end of July. If you are not a member please bring £2.50 with you to join. Once we have numbers, I will disclose a meeting point but not the exact location. Please remember it is an offence to recklessly disturb otters. Locations where otters are regularly sited are highly confidential and should not be disclosed to the wider public or other members.

2.2 *OSG meeting*

There is an informal OSG members meeting where they intend to discuss a number of relevant topics. Neither myself or Vivien are available to attend. The meeting will be held at the Wildfowl and Wetland Trust's Slimbridge centre in Gloucestershire on Saturday July 19th from 11-1.

If anyone has a strong knowledge of otter and current issues/threats, we are looking for someone to attend - possibly Hannah? Spaces are limited but it would be nice to have someone from up north attending. If no-one can attend then we have been promised minutes resulting from the event.

2.3 *Rio conference*

Well, it is nearly conference time and the sad news is that the football has created some crazy airline prices so sadly no-one from the network can attend. Again, minutes and images will be available after the event and any key news will be passed on. Incidentally, if any members have gone out for the football and fancy staying a bit longer let me know!!!!!!

2.4 *Other - Walk and Talk*

We will be looking to offer some otter surveying mornings at a weekend over the winter to give members a chance to meet. For members these events are free but we will open them to the wider public at a cost of £2.50 to try and generate some funds. We intend to hold these in areas where we can more or less predict that there will be signs. We may need to try a few sites so will move between areas throughout the course of the morning. Once we have a list of interested people we will circulate details for car sharing, local train stations etc. The areas I will putting forward is an area close to Derwent Reservoir/Blanchland and a location which will see us dot

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about a bit between Hexham, Acomb and if all else fails Corbridge and Bywell. Vivien will be round the Durham area and Sian around the Newcastle area. If you have a particular area what you would like us to host a walk and talk please let us know.

3. News

3.1 *Otters and fisheries - will the battle ever end?*

Several publications recently have suggested the dramatic idea of culling otters in some areas of the UK and in other parts of Europe such as Austria. This is all primarily centred around the fishing industry and otter taking carp and other slow moving coarse and game fish. This is despite the obvious - ITS CALLED OTTER FENCING. It does not make sense to me that people install what are effectively perfect otter feeding stations and then are surprised that otter feed from them. Several solutions have been used which centre around the use of fencing and in some instances, ponds situated outside of the fencing from which otter can feed have been used with good success.

There is a lovely report from Limousin in the 1990's when a fisherman bought a fish farm which suffered serious damage due to otters. He found it very difficult to find a solution as the otters were intelligent, resourceful and highly motivated and had become used to using the ponds as part of their territory, especially in the very harsh winters. They tried fencing, dogs, lighting, human beings. After a while, the fisherman began to respect the otters determination and found a solution by burying the bottom of the fencing and creating an overhang at the top. In the end the fisherman wrote a book which became the movie "Le Banquet des Loutres" and he became a central figure in reconciling the fish farm industry to the presence of otters. In the movie, the acting isn't the best but it is very sweet. Unfortunately there is not an English version but you can get the gist. If anyone would like to borrow the DVD then just ask.

One topic at the OSG meeting will be a discussion of how we can reconcile fisheries with the otter in the UK.

3.2 *Giant Otter News*

It appears that after giant otters became extinct or nearly extinct on the Tocantins river, at least some individuals are attempting to recolonise some areas, in spite of the fact that five hydroelectric dams have been built along the river.

Following these developments, funding has been awarded for a PhD student to undertake work which aims to recover a giant otter population in the Paraná Basin in Brazil. The start date is urgent and interested parties should contact Caroline Leuchtenberger (caroleucht@gmail.com) or Guilherme Mourão

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(guilherme.mourao@embrapa.br) as soon as possible. - Becca, Suze any interest? Anyone else?

3.3 Otters in Switzerland

Darius Weber of the OSG recently circulated the following:

I have good news from Switzerland: after 25 years, wild otters are back in our country. Thanks to the expansion of the french otter population in the Rhone river system, the species has reached the surroundings of Geneva.

We had some erratic observations of single otters and some animals escaped from captivity during the last ten years, but now we have the first record of an otter seemingly belonging to what could be called a continuous viable otter population (viable in France, not yet in Switzerland!).

best wishes to everybody out in the otter world from a very happy

Darius Weber

3.4 Persecution in our region?

We have had a trickle of records of men hunting otter with dogs and clubs from across the region but we now have one of the first pieces of evidence to suggest that people may be shooting these beautiful creatures. A recent post-mortem report indicated that a small male we collected in Northumberland had a **single small (2.6mm) lead pellet in his pelt with no sign of entry wound or damage and a 2nd pellet found just to the left of the spine on hind quarters which had penetrated through the pelt but had not fully entered muscle layer. He had a smaller area of bruising on his hind leg, possibly associated with shot.**

What is even more sad is that this little animal had managed to survive a broken hind leg which had fully healed and then an attempt to shoot him and finally ended up dead within a 30 mile an hour zone on a narrow country road.

For completeness we must point out that there is no evidence that whoever took the shot was aware that they were targeting an otter.

I know that some of you feel disappointed by the reaction of the police when you have reported events. If this is the case, it maybe that you have not spoken to the correct department - you should ask for the Wildlife Crime Unit. The average policeman knows very little about Wildlife Law. If you still feel dissatisfied then get in touch and we will pursue things on your behalf.

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3.5 Some very sad news

The following is taken from the CIEEM website:

CIEEM is very sad to report that Rob Strachan died peacefully at home after a short battle with cancer.

Rob was very active and influential in the nature conservation sector and will be sadly missed.

Rob was a professional ecologist with Natural Resources Wales with specialist duties for Priority Biodiversity Action Plan mammals (otters, water voles, bats). He was the author of several publications, including the Water Vole Conservation Handbook, CIEEM's Competencies for Species Survey: Water Vole, and the British Natural History Series' Mammal Detective.

Rob's specialisms included Environmental Impact Assessment, Ecological Surveys, and Endangered Species work.

Rob leaves behind him a wonderful legacy through his work and passion for otters, water voles and his love for wildlife.

Rob was one of the leading experts in identifying prey remains in otter spraint in the UK.

4. Recent sightings

We have had some wonderful records from members of the public seeing otters on the Hexham to Newcastle train between Prudhoe and Wylam. We have regularly found spraint around Wylam and the wet footprint photograph on the website is also from this location.

Debs and David have both captured video footage of otter swimming and playing.

This March, we had a very unusual record from Debs of an otter swimming along with a rabbit in its mouth. Unfortunately Debs is becoming renowned for not having the camera, the light being too low to get the shot or being so excited about seeing the otter that she forgets about the shot!!!!!!!

We also had a very excited email from Judith who saw her first ever otter, in Gosforth of all places. The otter crossed the road in front of her (and survived unharmed!). It is lovely to have a city record which is not a report of a road traffic collision.

Thanks to you all for your records, keep them coming.

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David Sumpton



Mrs S Kennedy

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David Sumpton



David French

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5. Research update

5.1 Mortality hotspots in Newcastle and the surrounding area.

We have a student Hannah Mitchell of Newcastle University who is investigating hotspots of otter mortality through mapping of records and then visiting key areas to investigate local factors which may be attributed to otters crossing these roads. This could be, for example, lack of a sufficient wide culvert/pipe under a road which then forces the otter up and over the road. We are very much looking forward to Hannah's results which will be made available to the Local Wildlife Trusts, The Environment Agency and the Highways Agency to see if we can mitigate and learn lessons for the installation future road networks.

Just a reminder to all that we need your help to locate, report and/or collect otter carcasses in your area. Please email otters.northeast@gmail.com or contact us via the website.

5.2 Otter spraint analysis

Vivien is working with Durham University to look at otter diet. While this is not a new area of research, it is by no means something that we should assume we know. Otter diet is highly influenced by prey availability and therefore can monitor what is happening in our river systems. Obviously there is the need to account for a bias towards easy-to-catch fish but as this will always be the case and therefore the long term trends in data can be assessed. It will also be very interesting to look at the preferences of otter in urban areas - what are they finding to eat? In all studies, fish are the predominant item within the otter diet, could it be something else in our urban otters - rodents, birds, amphibians?

Vivien is also looking out for crayfish remains within the spraint. Our native crayfish is still present but declining in our region as it is out competed by the non-native signal crayfish. Investigations into otter spraint may be useful in mapping the distribution of crayfish, particularly if we can test the crayfish remains to determine which species is present. This is something we will contact the Waterford Institute of Technology about.

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6. AOB

6.1 *Thank you*

Thank you to new members, especially Matt who is still waiting for his sticker and survey cards (which happen to be in my car which has now been in the garage for 2 weeks!!!!).

Thank you to everyone who has sent in records.

And a huge huge thank you to everyone who braved the weather to help out with the annual Autumn survey.

6.2 *Change of email - Lizzie Ross*

For those of you who know me in a professional context and email records to that particular email address, please note it will no-longer be active beyond the 1st of August 2014 so please make sure that emails come to otters.northeast@gmail.com. Many thanks.

6.3 Rowing and Canoe Clubs

We had an excellent suggestion from James at NHSN that canoe and rowing clubs could provide a source of collecting otter data. I would also extend this to the angling community - well the ones that like otters!!

If you are a member of a club could you send me the details of the best person to contact. Also, with the limited time I have available over the summer months it would be much appreciated if someone could volunteer to pull a list together of such clubs over Northumberland, Durham and Darlington. I can then send out a blanket email saying who we are and what sort of information we are looking for. Any volunteers?