2014 DWT Otter Survey

Summary of Results

The second DWT Otter Survey took place on the weekend of the 26th/27th April 2014, many thanks and congratulations to all the volunteers who took part and helped once more to make this event a success.

The bad news was that in the north and east of County Durham the weather on the survey weekend was pretty dreadful with heavy rain in many places on both Friday and Saturday nights and, in some places, all through Sunday. This was extremely unlucky as, until then, April had been quite dry. 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.

However, on a positive note around 120 of you braved the conditions to survey 100 patches (7 more than last year) containing 588 sites (71 more than last year). There were 22 empty patches (due to adverse conditions preventing survey, late drop-outs that could not be filled, a shortage of surveyors in some areas and non-returned forms) which did leave some gaps in our coverage. Many volunteers also recorded other species of mammals and less common birds they encountered (tracks/signs and/or visuals) while they were doing the survey and those results are shown in the table below the otter data.

Otters

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. However, many of these were within a single patch or close to those on neighbouring patches and have therefore been adjudicated as a single otter territory. There were also 5 patches with fresh positive signs on Day 1 in which no new signs were recorded on Day 2. These were in locations that were sufficiently isolated from the nearest 'hit' territory to be classed as 'near misses'. (A 'near miss' is defined as an area where an otter is active and present, as indicated by Day 1 signs, but for some reason was not located on the second day.) There was also one 'reasonable suspicion' otter which was

captured on a trail camera the night after the survey, but for which no fresh spraint had been found. This was on a watercourse that was isolated from the next nearest territory.

It must be emphasised that all numbers calculated are for territories and not for individual animals. Many of those territories may be occupied by females with cubs rather than just a single otter, so the number of actual animals will be greater than the number of territories estimated.

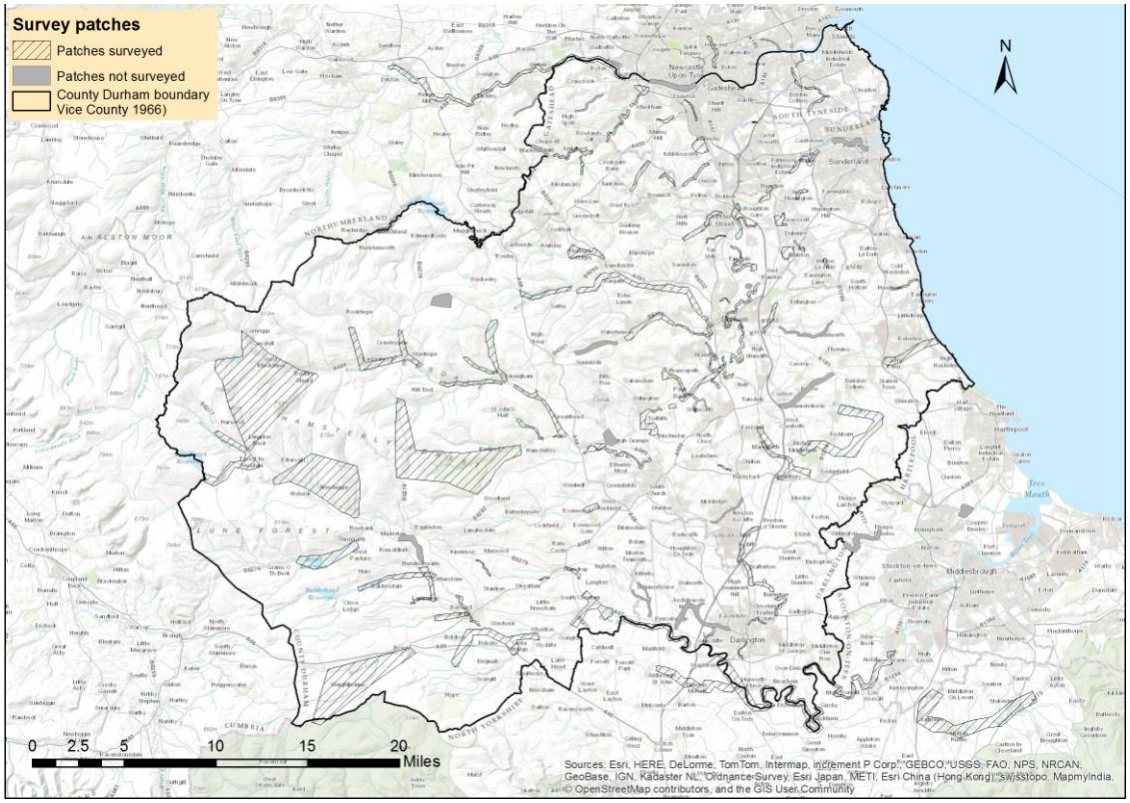
Extrapolating from the number of Day 2 'hits', 'near misses' and 'reasonable suspicion otters' to adjudicate the number of otter territories is a subjective exercise and not one that stands up to scientific scrutiny. However, it is better than anything else we have, or are likely to have without the investment of tens of thousands of pounds in an extensive network of remote-capture cameras and the help of several hundred volunteers to place and monitor them.

However, as you will see from the results laid out below 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.

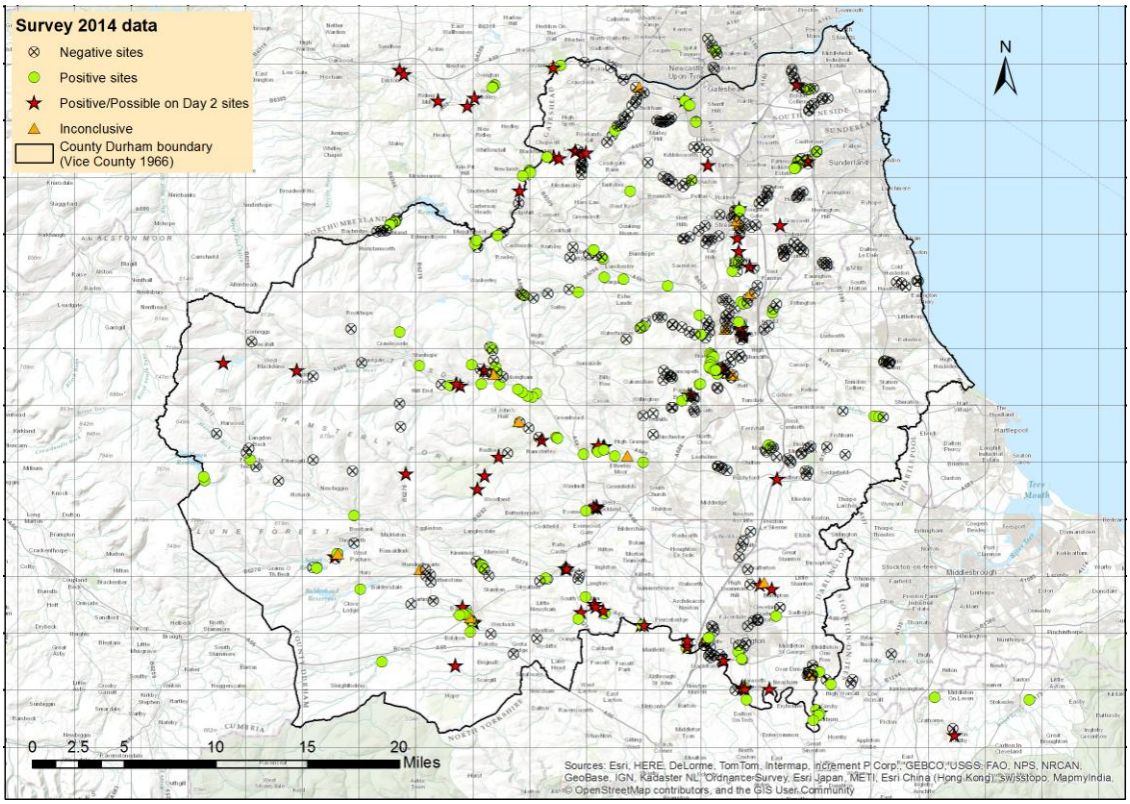
In the meantime, I would encourage you all to continue to look for otter signs on your patch periodically, both to keep your skills fresh and to refine the choice of sites for future surveys - and if you keep a record of what you find even better.

Other species

There was a considerable increase in reporting for sightings of less common bird species this year with the number of dippers reported up from 8 in 2013 to 23 this year. There were also two reported barn owl sightings and one buzzard as well as a good array of ducks, geese and other birds. The number of mammal sightings was remarkably consistent with last year with deer tracks/visuals at 17 compared to 18 in 2013; mink track reports at 14 – identical to 2013; badger reports were also identical at 4.



Map showing location of patches surveyed and those not surveyed.



Map showing all data from 2014 DWT otter survey.

Otter data

Catchment	**Patches**	**Sites**	**Positives (possibles)**	**Hits**	**Near miss/reasonable suspicion**	**Otter territories**
Tees	30	172	70 (8)	26	3	10
Tyne	19	121	44 (1)	15	2	7
Wear	49	284	98 (11)	26	1	12
Castle Eden Burn	1	6	0 (0)	0	0	0
Hawthorn Burn	1	5	0 (0)	0	0	0
Totals	**100**	**588**	**212 (20)**	**67**	**6**	**29**

Empty patches	22
Otter territories located	29
Reasonable suspicion/ near misses	6
Total adjudicated territories	35

By-catch of other species

	Species	Number
Birds	Barn Owl	2
	Blackcap	3
	Buzzard	1
	Chiffchaff	2
	Common sandpiper	4
	Common tern	4
	Dipper	23
	Flycatcher	1
	Goldeneye	1
	Goosander	14
	Great spotted woodpecker	2
	Grey heron	8
	Grey wagtail	13
	House martin	Several
	Kingfisher	5
	Lapwing	1
	Linnet	1
	Little ringed plover	4
	Oystercatcher	9
	Pochard	2
	Red-breasted merganser	1
	Red-legged partridge	1
	Reed warbler	1
	Sand martin	Several
	Sedge warbler	1
	Shelduck	6
	Skylark	1
	Whitethroat	3
	Willow warbler	1
Mammals	Badger (tracks/setts/latrine)	4
	Deer (tracks)	10
	Roe deer (visual)	7
	Fox (tracks/scat)	4
	Mink (tracks/scat)	14
	Water vole (latrine/burrows)	6
Amphibians	Common toad	2