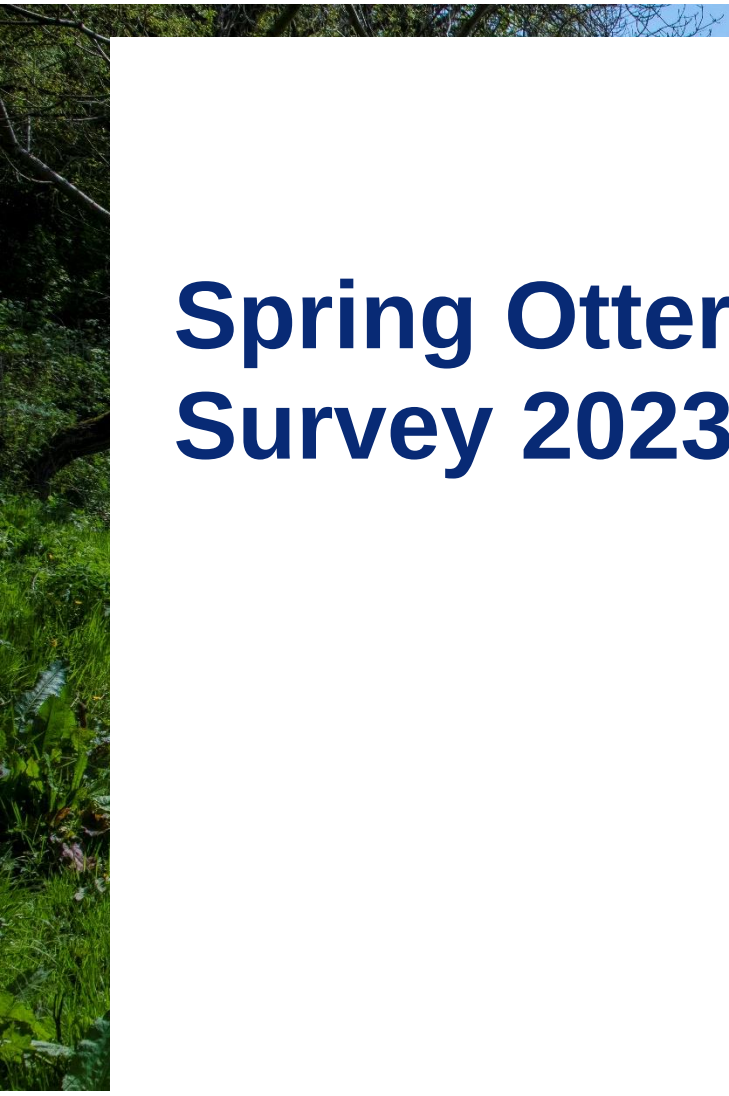
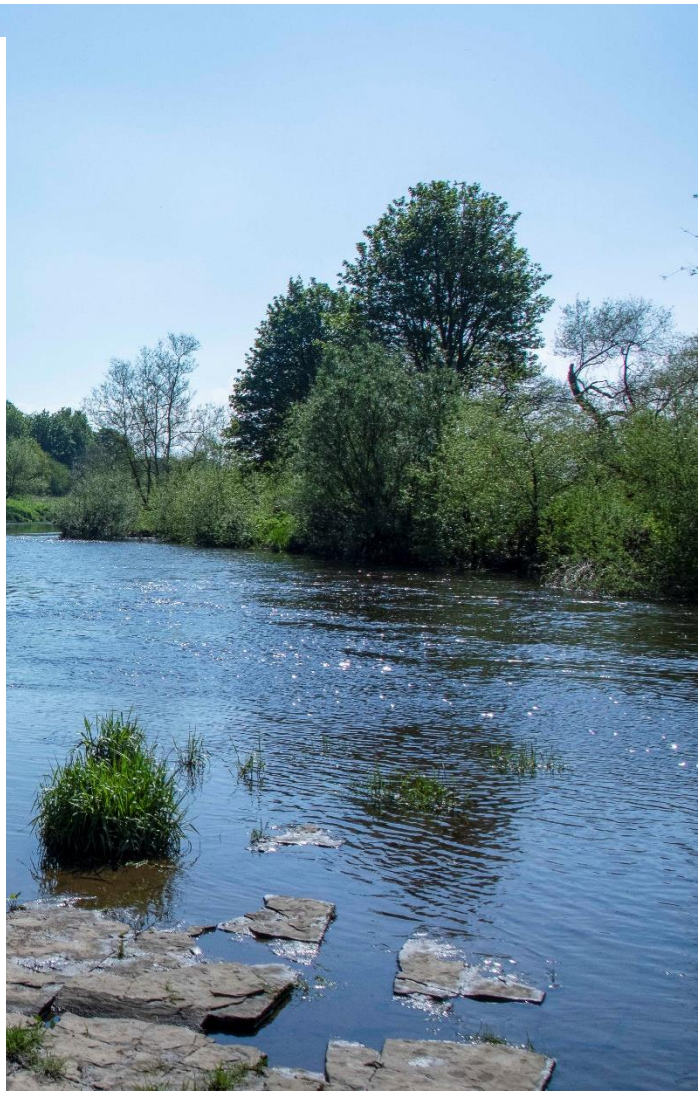


Spring Otter Survey 2023



JULY 30 **2023**

The Otter Network

Results and Report

Summary of Results

The 11th Spring Otter Survey run by The North East Otter Network took place this year over the weekend of 22nd/23rd April and promised to be the biggest yet.

Unfortunately, nobody told the weather which was probably the worst I can remember in all the years the survey has run. This resulted in some volunteers finding it impossible to access some or all of their survey patches. The situation varied across the region with upland areas finding very high water levels on the Saturday but better conditions on the Sunday. In lowland areas the opposite was true with conditions wet but manageable on Saturday, but on Sunday water levels had risen markedly and many sites that had been checked on Day 1 were under water and/or inaccessible on Day 2.
It was particularly frustrating as after a cold, wet spring conditions had improved the week before the survey and until the Thursday the forecast had looked reasonable. However, despite these difficulties a large number of volunteers braved the weather and managed to survey a good number of sites across an enlarged area.

Below is a summary of details from the survey:
The survey area was enlarged again this year with NT Wallington taking part and filling in some of the gap we had in the north. Volunteer numbers were up on 2022 and even though several people were unable to do their surveys as they couldn't access their patches, there were still 99 individual or teams of volunteers out surveying over the weekend. Between them they covered 106 patches containing 618 sites.
There were three sightings of otters by surveyors over the weekend, one on the Tees and two separate sightings on the Wear, and there were also three trail camera captures – two on the Browney and one in Gosforth. The good news overall is that, despite the dreadful weather conditions, the number of active otter territories located was up on 2022 returning to 2019 and 2021 levels at 46. This is particularly good news as it now looks as if the dip last year was an anomaly. We cannot be sure of course until after another couple of surveys but it is definitely hopeful.

Of course, not everyone finds spraint or other signs and I know this can be disappointing. However, I must emphasise once again that not finding otter signs is just as important as finding them as this tells us that otters are not using those areas. For this reason, **we request that everyone records all the sites they check – even those where nothing is found**. Unfortunately, some people are still only sending in records for sites that are positive for signs, this makes comparing data across years very difficult. So, to everyone who took part but drew a blank please know that while you may feel you have not contributed much, **negative data really is just as important as positive data**. It tells us where otters are not active which helps to identify watercourses that do not provide adequate food resources or habitat or have suffered pollution events, it also allows us to pick up on fluctuations in the otter population at a local level as well as across the whole survey area.

Otter Data

Of the 618 sites checked 214 (35%) were positive for otter signs – this is a considerable drop on previous years but not particularly surprising given the weather conditions. A further 20 sites had possible, but inconclusive, signs. There were 384 sites (62%) that were totally negative (some sites were reported as negative on one of the days and could not be surveyed on the other due to river levels and have been included in this number). This is higher than in previous years and is again unsurprising due to the conditions. There were 112 unsurveyed patches this year – several of these had been allocated to volunteers but were not accessible over the survey weekend.

There were 68 Day 2 ‘hits’ (fresh signs) with many, as you would expect, located in close proximity to one another in either the same or a neighbouring patch. These are adjudicated as belonging to a single territory. There were 7 sites/patches where fresh deposits were found on Day 1 but where nothing new was found on Day 2. These sites/patches were sufficiently isolated from the next nearest ‘hit’ to allow us to be confident that they were in a different territory and that we were just not looking in the right place on the Sunday to find fresh signs. These sites/patches have been adjudicated as ‘Near Miss’ active territories. There were also 2 sightings of otters in areas where there were no surveyors or no fresh signs were found and these have been adjudicated as ‘Reasonable Suspicion’ otters.

As always, I have erred on the side of caution when allocating 'hits' to territories and have lumped fresh signs together into one active territory rather than splitting them into two where they are within a 7km stretch of watercourse. The total number of adjudicated active territories therefore was 46 – this is of course a minimum number as there are sure to be some that we missed.

For those unfamiliar with the way the data are analysed it is important to emphasise that we are counting active otter territories not individual animals (with the exception of visuals and trail cameras). It is likely 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.
The results are laid out in numerical form in the tables and maps that follow this report.

Other Species

More than 110 species of birds, mammals, amphibians, fish, insects and plants were recorded in addition to otter signs this year – no mean feat in the conditions.
For the second year running adders made the list with a sighting of two in Weardale. Mammal sightings included 14 Roe Deer, 6 Brown Hares, a Common Seal in the River Wear and two Brown Long-eared Bats. There were four records of American Mink signs but no visual sightings this year. Notable bird sightings included a Cetti's Warbler in the Tees Valley, 22 Dippers, 5 Kingfishers, 5 Kestrels, 11 Curlews and a Ring-necked Parakeet.

Maps and tables outlining the data are displayed on the following pages. The patches/territories located are broken down into operational catchments rather than the larger management catchment categories.
As always, a huge thank you to everyone who took part – we really could not do this without you.
If anyone would like to ask any questions, please contact me through the Otter Network at otters.northeast@gmail.com
Dr Vivien Kent – The Otter Network

Maps, Tables & Charts

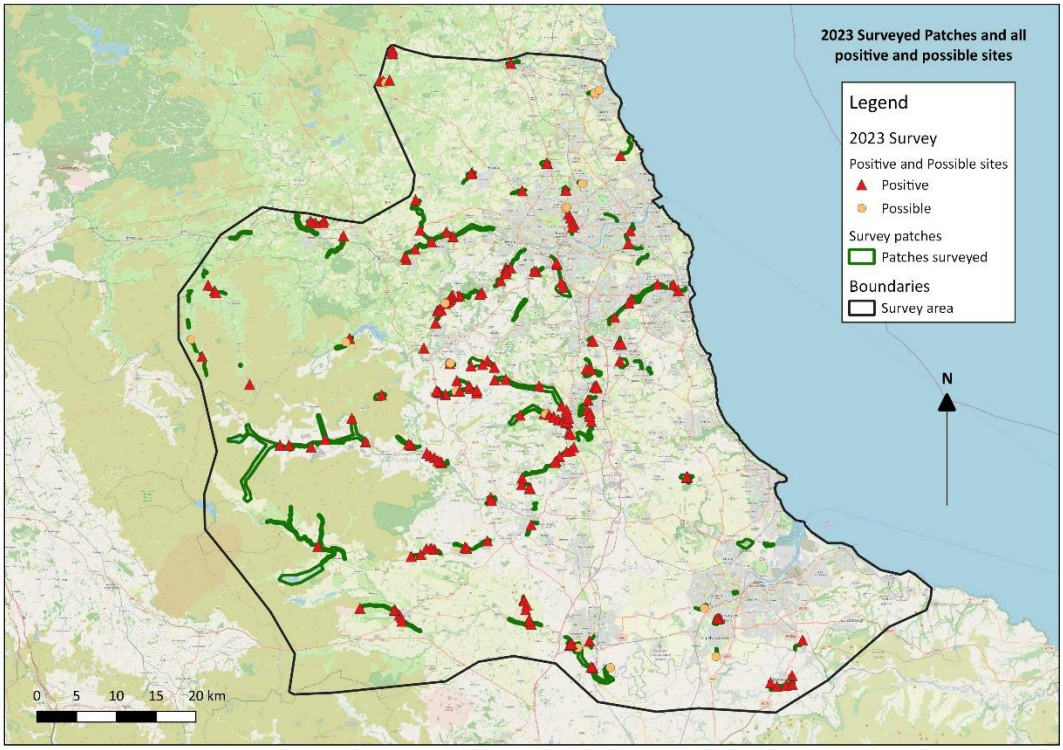


Figure 1. Map showing surveyed patches and all positive and possible sites

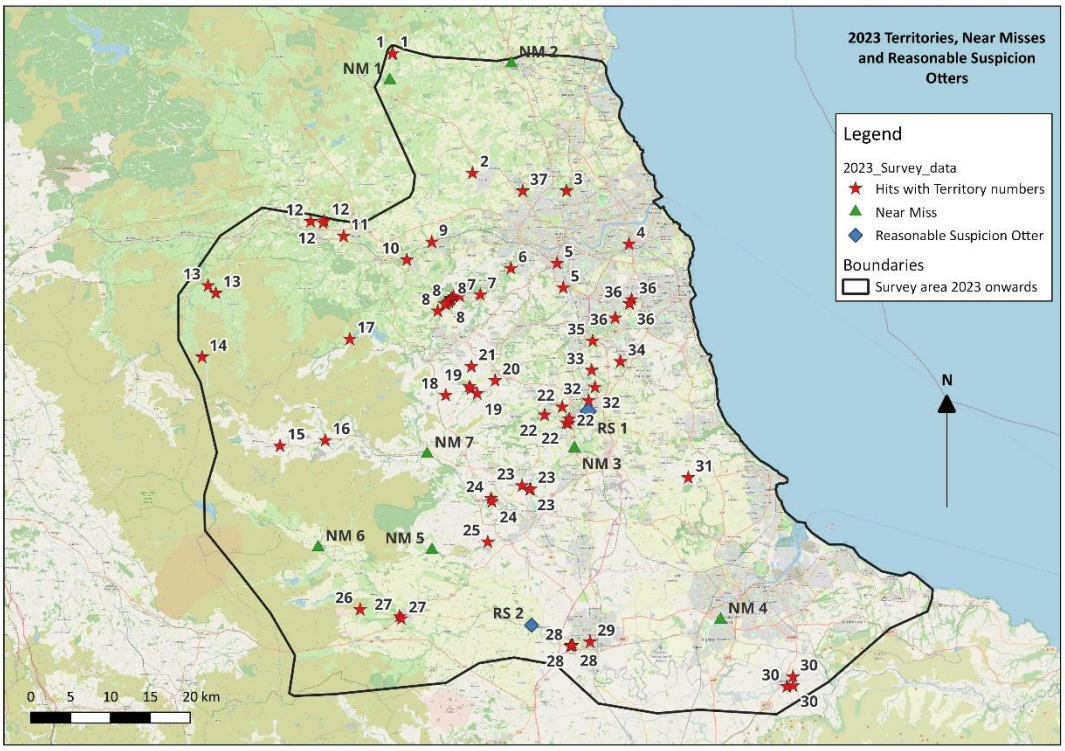


Figure 2. Map showing Day 2 'hits' with adjudicated territory numbers, 'near miss (NM)' territories and 'reasonable suspicion' (RS)' otters.

Table 1. 2023 Otter survey data

Catchment	Patches	Sites	Negative sites	Positives (possibles)	Hits	NM & RS	Territories
Allen	8	52	47	5	3	0	2
Blyth	1	5	4	1	0	0	0
Blyth Estuary	1	9	5	0 (4)	0	0	0
Browney	7	44	2	40 (2)	11	0	5
Derwent Tyne	8	47	17	27 (3)	12	0	4
Gaunless	3	20	10	10	1	1	1
Leven	2	12	6	6 (1)	3	0	1
North Tyne *	1	3	3	0	0	0	0
Seaham Peterlee Coast	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Skerne	2	10	6	4	2	0	2
South Tyne	2	12	9	2 (1)	0	0	0
Tees *	17	90	63	24 (3)	6	3	3
Tyne *	23	127	92	32 (3)	12	0	9
Wansbeck	3	20	10	9 (1)	2	2	1
Wear *	30	167	110	54 (3)	16	3	9
Totals *	**108**	**618**	**384**	**214 (21)**	**68**	**9**	**37**
* Several patches cover more than one catchment area							

Table 2. 2023 Summary

Empty patches	112
Otter territories located	37
Reasonable suspicion/near misses	9
Total Adjudicated territories	**46**

Table 3. All surveys summary

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Patches	93	100	112	119	115	94	123	87	124	107	106
Total sites	517	588	608	644	629	516	681	456	751	677	618
Sites positive	216	212	260	281	272	224	282	259	398	338	214
% sites positive	42	36	42	44	43	43	41	57	53	50	35
% sites negative	56	60	53	53	54	53	56	41	46	49	62
Hits	59	67	56	78	70	55	83	48	90	73	67
Active territories	26	29	27	30	32	24	39	20	34	31	37
NM/RS	3	6	9	5	6	5	8	11	11	5	9
Adjudicated territories	**29**	**35**	**36**	**35**	**37**	**29**	**47**	**31**	**45**	**36**	**46**

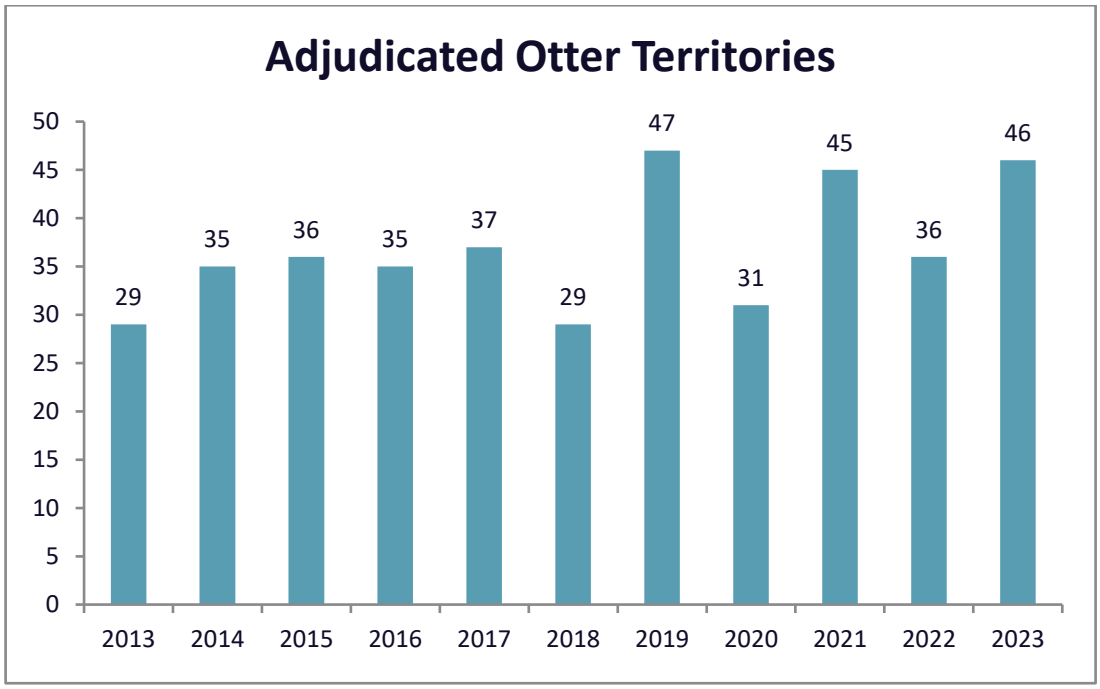


Figure 3. Adjudicated active otter territories in 11 annual surveys. From 2019 the survey has been conducted over a larger area than previous years. The 2020 survey was severely curtailed by Covid-19 restrictions.

Other Species Selected Records

	Species	No of Records*
Birds	Avocet	1
	Blackbird	6
	Blackcap	9
	Blue Tit	4
	Bullfinch	1
	Cetti's Warbler	1
	Chaffinch	4
	Chiffchaff	10
	Coal Tit	3
	Common Sandpiper	6
	Common Snipe	1
	Cormorant	5
	Curlew	9
	Dipper	15
	Dunlin	1
	Dunnock	2
	Eider Duck	1
	Fieldfare	1
	Gadwall	1
	Goldcrest	1
	Goldfinch	4
	Goosander	8
	Great-Spotted Woodpecker	4
	Great Tit	8
	Greenfinch	1
	Grey Heron	8
	Grey Wagtail	9
	Greylag Goose	10
	Herring Gull	4
	House Martin	2
	Jackdaw	2
	Jay	2

	Kestrel	**4**
	Kingfisher	**5**
	Lapwing	**6**
	Lesser Black-backed Gull	**1**
	Little Egret	**1**
	Long-tailed Tit	**3**
	Mallard	**23**
	Mandarin Duck	**3**
	Meadow Pipit	**1**
	Mistle Thrush	**2**
	Mute Swan	**2**
	Nuthatch	**3**
	Oystercatcher	**12**
	Pied Wagtail	**1**
	Redshank	**2**
	Ring-necked Parakeet	**1**
	Robin	**4**
	Rook	**2**
	Sand Martin	**5**
	Shelduck	**2**
	Shoveler	**1**
	Skylark	**3**
	Song Thrush	**6**
	Sparrowhawk	**3**
	Stock Dove	**1**
	Stonechat	**1**
	Swallow	**7**
	Tawny Owl	**1**
	Teal	**1**
	Tree Sparrow	**1**
	Treecreeper	**3**
	Tufted Duck	**3**
	Whooper Swan	**1**
	Wigeon	**1**

	Willow Tit	1
	Willow Warbler	7
	Wren	12
	Yellowhammer	2
Mammals	Badger (tracks/setts/latrine)	2
	Bank Vole	1
	Brown Hare	3
	Brown Long-eared Bat	1
	Common Seal	1
	Deer (tracks/latrine)	6
	Grey Squirrel (visual)	2
	Mink (tracks/scat)	4
	Rabbit (visual)	4
	Red Fox (visual/trail cam)	1 (dead)
	Roe Deer (visual)	7
	Water Vole (tracks/latrine)	1
Fish	Salmon	1
Amphibians	Common Frog	1 (dead)
Reptiles	Adder	1
Insects	Common Blue Butterfly	1
Plants	Butterbur	1
	Common Dog Violet	1
	Cowslip	2
	Giant Hogweed	2
	Himalayan Balsam	1
	Marsh Marigold	2
	Moschatel	1
	Opposite-leaved Golden Saxifrage	1
	Wild Strawberry	1
* Number of records not number of individuals		