SPRING OTTER SURVEY 2026

JULY 2026

The Otter Network

Results and Report

Summary of Results

The 13th Spring Otter Survey run by The North East Otter Network took place this year over the weekend of 25th/26th April.

Conditions this year were quite similar to those in 2025 in that April had been dry and, despite the wet winter, water levels were comparatively low. As was discovered last year this creates a different set of challenges to those encountered in wet years as otter signs can be hard to find on exposed, rocky river banks and tracks are not always apparent on hard silt or mud. It is also likely that otters will have stopped using some of the smaller tributaries due to the lack of water and food.

Below is a summary of details from the survey:

The survey area was extended north and west this year with a large group of new volunteers covering the River Coquet around Rothbury. The previous gap in coverage in the Ridsdale area was also covered for the first time. However, a few volunteers from the south of the survey area dropped out meaning that we were unable to cover the River Leven this year, but we were still able to cover the River Tees along most of its length. There was also a slight drop off in volunteer numbers in the Allen Valleys.

In total, volunteer numbers were similar to 2025 with 89 individuals or teams of volunteers out surveying over the weekend. Between them they covered 100 patches (with several volunteers covering more than one patch) containing 571 sites.

As always it is important to emphasise that not everyone finds spraint, tracks or other signs and I know this can be disappointing. However, as always I must emphasise that not finding otter signs is just as important as finding them as this gives us information about the watercourses that otters are not using. It also enables us to make comparisons between years as to where the gaps in otter territories are. For this reason, I would like to remind everyone once again that we need the data from all the sites that are checked – even those where nothing is found.

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 may 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.

There was one live sighting of an otter over the weekend by surveyors on the River Wear, as well as a lovely trail camera capture on the Saturday night of a female with two nearly full grown cubs at Gosforth Nature Reserve.

Unsurprisingly given the larger survey area, the number of active otter territories located was up on last year with a total of 41 adjudicated territories identified. The number of territories we find does vary from year to year but does seem to be reasonably stable.

Otter Data

Of the 571 sites checked 275 (48%) were positive for otter signs – this is about average compared with previous years. A further 10 sites had possible, but inconclusive, signs. There were 286 sites (50%) that were totally negative. This is again about average compared with previous years. There were 137 unsurveyed patches this year, however some of these are in very hard to access areas so this number should not be taken as an indication that we are necessarily missing large parts of the survey area.

There were 69 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. In those cases they are adjudicated as belonging to a single territory.

There were 6 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 otter territory and that we had just not looked in the right place on the Sunday to find fresh signs. These sites/patches have therefore been adjudicated as ‘Near Miss’ active territories. There was also one site where fresh feeding remains were found on Sunday in an area where fresh spraint had been seen on Saturday. This has also been adjudicated as a ‘Near Miss’. There was a reported sighting of an otter (not by a volunteer) on the Saturday of the survey weekend on a stretch of the Wear

where there were no surveyors and this has therefore been adjudicated as a ‘Reasonable Suspicion’ otter.

As always, I have erred on the side of caution when allocating ‘hits’ to territories. So where there were fresh signs at different sites within a 7km stretch of watercourse I have lumped them into one active territory 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 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 may seem slightly arbitrary but it really is the only way of getting any kind of numerical estimate 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 100 other species of birds, mammals, amphibians, fish, insects and plants were recorded in addition to otter signs this year. Highlights included:

A Brook Lamprey in the River Derwent, a Common Lizard, three Cuckoo records, a Hobby, a Sparrowhawk two separate sightings of Red Kites 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 has any questions, please contact me through the Otter Network at otters.northeast@gmail.com

Dr Vivien Kent – The Otter Network

Maps, Tables & Charts

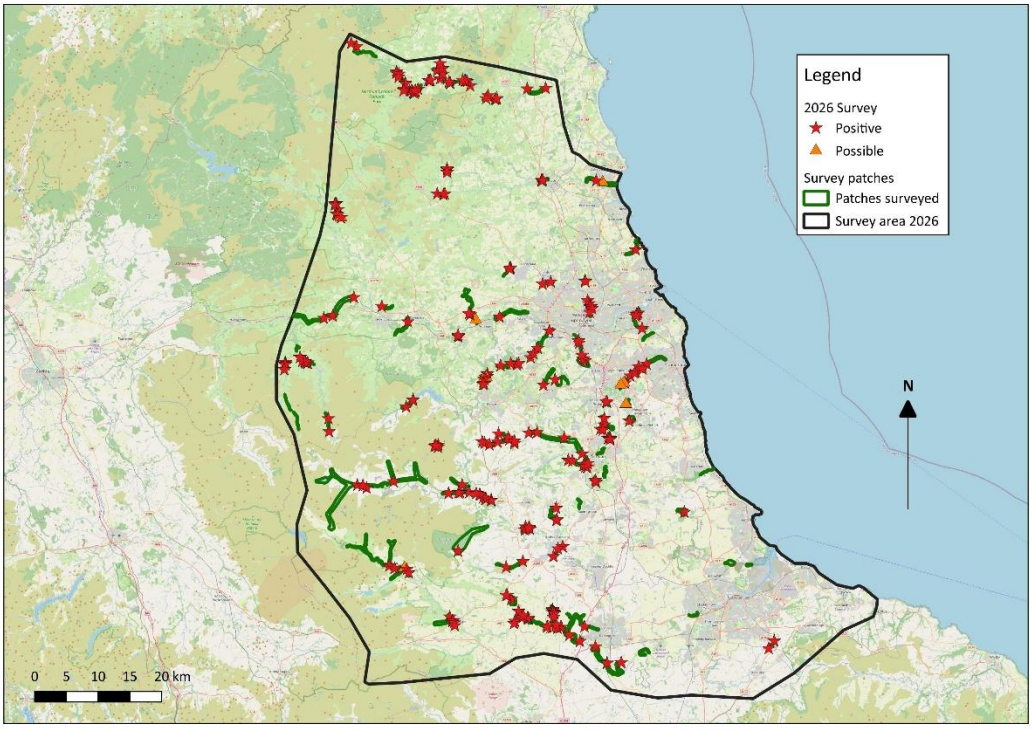

Figure 1. Map showing surveyed patches and all positive and possible sites

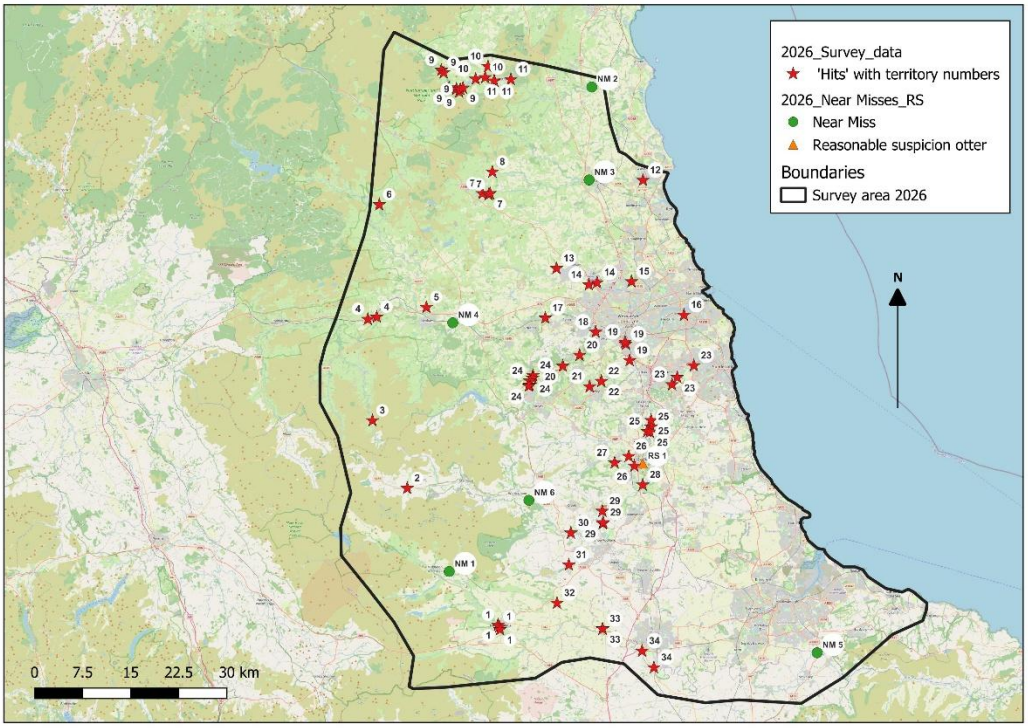

Figure 2. Map showing Day 2 'hits' with adjudicated territory numbers, 'near miss (NM)' territories and 'reasonable suspicion' (RS)' otters.

Table 1. 2026 Otter survey data

Catchment	Patches	Sites	Negative sites	Positives (possibles)	Hits	NM & RS	Territories
Allen	7	44	30	14	1		1
Blyth	1	6	5	1	0		0
Browney	5	21	1	20	4		3
Coquet	14	83	31	50(2)	13	1	3
Derwent Tyne	5	28	9	17(2)	8		3
Gaunless	2	7	2	5	1		1
North Tyne *	1	10	0	9(1)	1		1
Seaham Peterlee Coast	1	11	11	0	0		0
South Tyne	1	5	2	3	2		1
Tees *	24	112	60	51(1)	9	2	4
Tyne *	14	72	38	33(1)	10	1	7
Wansbeck	4	23	10	12(1)	5	1	3
Wear	28	149	87	60(2)	15	2	7
Totals *	**107**	**571**	**286**	**275(10)**	**69**	**7**	**34**

* Patches cover more than one catchment area

Table 2. 2026 Summary

Empty patches	**137**
Otter territories located	**34**
Reasonable suspicion/near misses	**7**
Total Adjudicated territories	**41**

Table 3. All surveys summary

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2025	2026
Patches	93	100	112	119	115	94	123	87	124	107	106	99	100
Total sites	517	588	608	644	629	516	681	456	751	677	618	615	571
Sites positive	216	212	260	281	272	224	282	259	398	338	214	266	275
% sites positive	42	36	42	44	43	43	41	57	53	50	35	43	48
% sites negative	56	60	53	53	54	53	56	41	46	49	62	54	50
Hits	59	67	56	78	70	55	83	48	90	73	67	61	69
Active territories	26	29	27	30	32	24	39	20	34	31	37	30	34
NM/RS	3	6	9	5	6	5	8	11	11	5	9	5	7
Adjudicated territories	**29**	**35**	**36**	**35**	**37**	**29**	**47**	**31**	**45**	**36**	**46**	**35**	**41**
Adjudicated territories old survey area							**40**						**36**

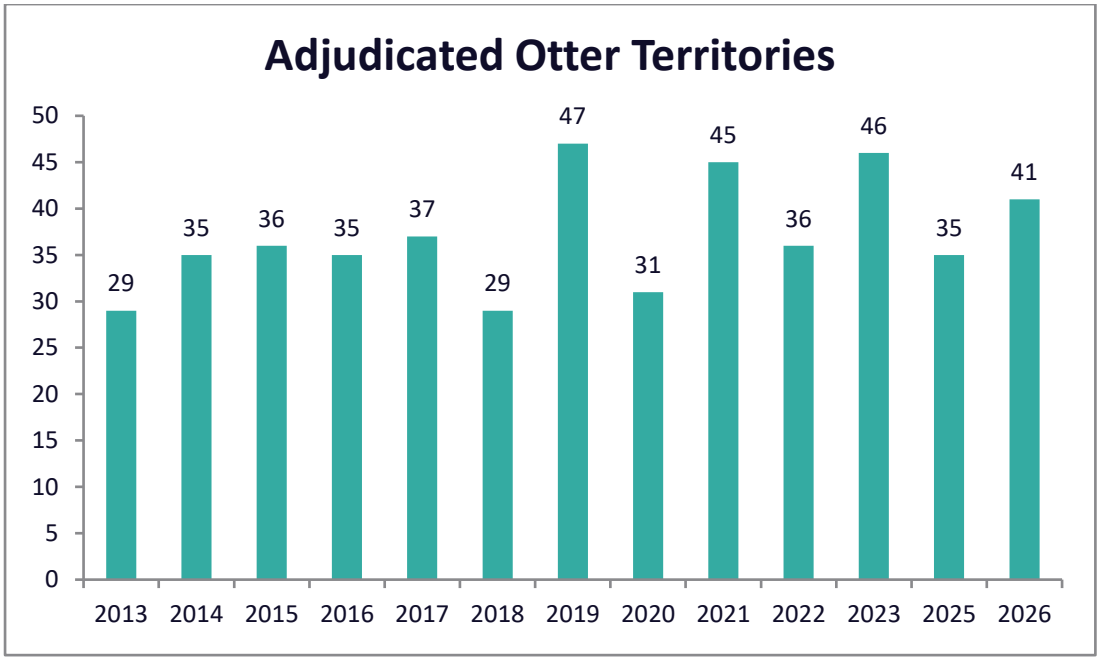

Figure 3. Adjudicated active otter territories in 13 annual surveys.
From 2019 the survey has been conducted over a larger area than previously. The survey area was enlarged again in 2026.
The 2020 survey was severely curtailed by Covid-19 restrictions.
No survey took place in 2024.

Other Species Selected Records

	Species	No of Records*
Birds	Avocet	1
	Blackbird	10
	Blackcap	11
	Blue Tit	5
	Buzzard	3
	Chaffinch	5
	Chiffchaff	16
	Coal Tit	1
	Common Sandpiper	6
	Common Tern	1
	Common Whitethroat	1
	Cormorant	3
	Cuckoo	3
	Curlew	8
	Dipper	11
	Dunnock	1
	Eider Duck	1
	Gadwall	3
	Garden Warbler	1
	Goldcrest	1
	Goldfinch	5
	Goosander	8
	Great-Spotted Woodpecker	4
	Great Tit	8
	Greenfinch	1
	Grey Heron	13
	Grey Partridge	1
	Grey Wagtail	12
	Greylag Goose	8
	Herring Gull	2
	Hobby	1
	House Martin	2
	Jackdaw	3

	Kestrel	1
	Kingfisher	3
	Lapwing	8
	Lesser Black-backed Gull	1
	Lesser Whitethroat	1
	Little Egret	2
	Long-tailed Tit	3
	Mallard	20
	Mandarin Duck	8
	Meadow Pipit	2
	Mistle Thrush	3
	Mute Swan	4
	Nuthatch	3
	Oystercatcher	15
	Pied Wagtail	3
	Pink-footed Goose	1
	Red Kite	2
	Redshank	4
	Redstart	1
	Reed Bunting	4
	Reed Warbler	1
	Ringed Plover	1
	Ring-necked Parakeet	1
	Robin	8
	Sand Martin	9
	Sedge Warbler	2
	Shelduck	4
	Shoveler	1
	Skylark	6
	Song Thrush	6
	Sparrowhawk	1
	Stonechat	1
	Swallow	6
	Swift	1
	Tawny Owl	1
	Teal	1

	Treecreeper	1
	Tufted Duck	1
	Willow Tit	2
	Willow Warbler	11
	Wren	13
	Yellowhammer	1
Mammals	Bank Vole	2
	Brown Hare	6
	Grey Seal	1
	Deer (tracks/latrine)	8
	Grey Squirrel	3
	Hedgehog	1
	Mink (tracks/scat)	12
	Mink Visual	1
	Red Fox (scat/tracks)	2
	Roe Deer (visual)	7
	Stoat	2
	Wood Mouse	1
Fish	Brook Lamprey	1
Reptiles	Common Lizard	1
Insects	Ashy Mining Bee	1
	Buff-tailed Bumblebee	1
	Orange-tip	3
	Small Tortoiseshell	1
	Speckled Wood	1
Plants	Forget-me-not	1
	Honesty	1
	Lesser Celandine	1
Fungi	King Alfred's Cake	1
	St. George's Mushroom	1
* Number of records not number of individuals		