



THE OTTER NETWORK 2021 SPRING OTTER SURVEY



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2021

Results and report

Spring Otter Survey

RESULTS AND REPORT

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

The 2021 Spring Otter Survey run by The North East Otter Network took place over the weekend of 24th/25th April. The Survey was once again affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, although nowhere near as severely as in 2020.

Whilst the number of volunteers and patches surveyed was back up to 2019 levels, the fact that we were not able to run any field training events for new volunteers meant that there were still large gaps in the coverage – particularly in the Tees Valley - that we had hoped to be able to fill. As a result, the number of otter territories identified is slightly down on 2019 at 45, but this should not be taken to mean that the otter population is declining.

For the second year running the weather was fine and dry across the whole survey area. In fact, it was extremely dry and river levels were reported to be very low across the whole survey area. This has pluses and minuses when conducting surveys as it makes looking under bridges easier but finding tracks in hard baked mud and silt is very difficult.

Once again, I will emphasise that **not** finding otter signs is just as important as finding lots of spraint and/or tracks as this tells us that otters are not using those areas, this is why we request that everyone records **all** the sites they check – even those where nothing is found. So, to everyone who took part but drew a blank please know that, while you may be disappointed, negative data really is just as important for our records as it tells us where otters are **not** active. This helps to identify watercourses that do not provide adequate food resources or habitat and allows us to pick up on fluctuations in the otter population.

There was one sighting of an otter on the Saturday morning and another on the Sunday morning. There were also four trail camera captures of otters over the weekend and one on the Monday.

Over the weekend 115 volunteers, or teams of volunteers, managed to survey 124 patches containing 751 sites. This is the highest number of patches/sites checked since the survey started in 2013! However, as you will see from the map of patches surveyed there is still a gaping hole in the south-eastern part of

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the survey area, particularly in the Tees Valley, which we will endeavour to fill next year when it is hoped that training events will once more be possible.

There were also nearly 1000 records of other species recorded including plants, insects, birds, amphibians and mammals. Highlights are outlined in the table below the otter data.

Otter Data

Of the 751 sites checked 398 (53%) were positive for otter signs – this is a little down on last year but is a higher percentage than for all other years. A further 10 sites had possible but inconclusive signs. There were 343 sites (46%) which were totally negative – this is a higher percentage than last year but lower than in previous years in line with the above. There were again many empty patches this year (82) due to not being able to take on untrained volunteers, but new patches were also added. It is difficult therefore, even with the large number of patches surveyed, to make direct comparisons with results from previous years. Nevertheless, we can be reasonably confident that the otter population is stable and we are getting new data on activity and movements every time we survey. This all adds to the body of knowledge we are building up.

There were 90 Day 2 'hits' (fresh signs) and as usual, many of these 'hits' were located close together in the same or neighbouring patches and so have been adjudicated as belonging to a single territory. There were also 11 sites/patches where fresh deposits were found on Day 1 but where nothing new was discovered on Day 2. These sites/patches were sufficiently isolated from the next nearest 'hit' to allow us to be reasonably confident that we were just not looking in the right place on the Sunday. The 11 sites/patches in question have therefore been adjudicated as 'Near Miss' otter territories. There were no sightings or trail camera captures in areas that were either not surveyed or where there were no 'hits', so there were no 'Reasonable Suspicion' otters this year.

Those of you who have taken part in the survey before, and have therefore read these reports, know that I always err on the side of caution when allocating 'hits' to territories and will conservatively lump fresh signs together into one territory if they are within a 5km stretch of watercourse 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 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

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getting any kind of numerical data when surveying for otters which are an elusive, wide-ranging, cryptic animal with no easily identifiable markings.

You will see in the results table that the number of estimated territories this year is 45. This is considerably higher than last year (when coverage was severely curtailed) but is a little lower than 2019. So, while this year's results are much more in line with pre-Covid surveys, the gaps in coverage mean it is reasonable to assume that this is an underestimate of the number of territories in the survey area.

Other species

Nearly 200 species of birds, mammals, amphibians, fish, insects and plants were recorded in addition to otter signs this year. This is easily a new record.

The most unusual sighting was of an Emu in Weardale – just taking a stroll down the road, that was certainly a first!

Other notable records included 4 fox cubs seen on the Saturday morning - also in Weardale; 3 visuals of Mink - plus 17 further records of scat/tracks; 19 Roe Deer sightings; 1 Barn Owl visual; 51 Dipper records – including several nesting pairs; 14 Buzzard and 9 Kingfisher sightings.



Photo: Sylvia Cleasby



Photo: Lynda Bentley

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Maps and tables outlining the data are displayed on the following pages. You will see that this year I have broken the patches/territories located down into operational catchments rather than the larger management catchment categories. When we started this survey in 2013 nearly all our patches were in the Wear and Tees catchments, but our expansion in recent years means that it now makes more sense to break the results down into smaller categories.

As always a huge thank you to everyone who took part this year – 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

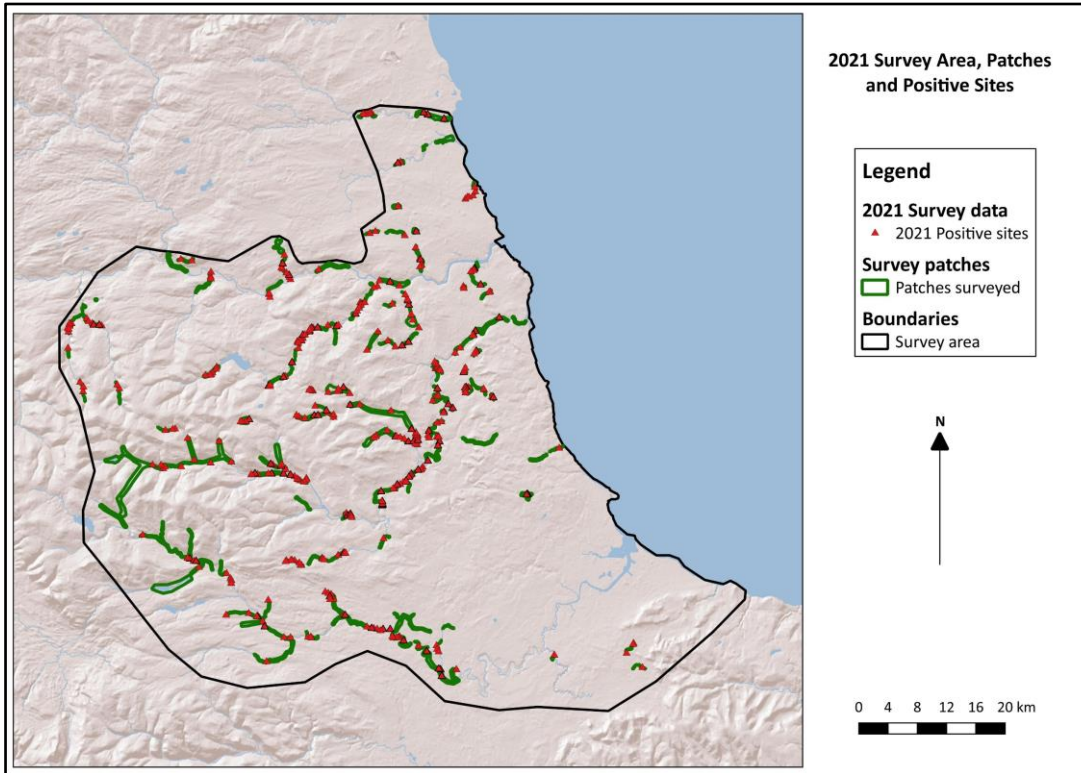


Figure 1. Map showing surveyed patches and all positive sites in 2021 survey

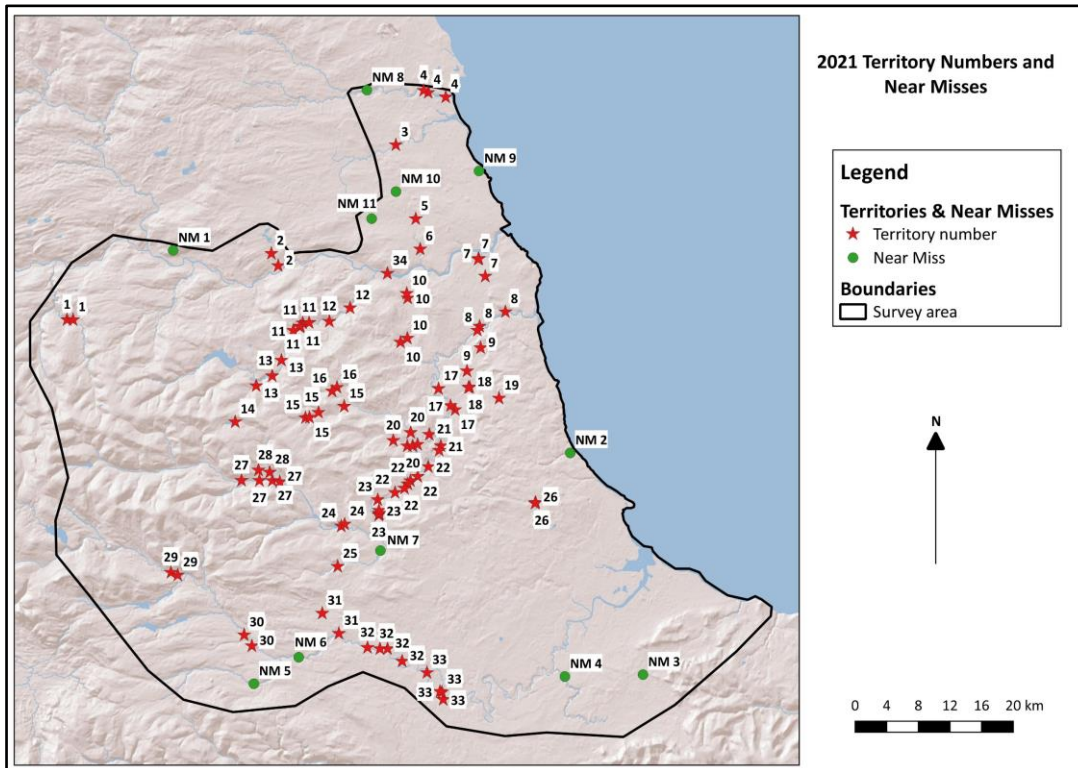


Figure 2. Map showing Day 2 'hits' with adjudicated territory numbers and 'near miss' otters.

Table 1. 2021 Otter survey data

Catchment	Patches	Sites	Negative sites	Positives (possibles)	Hits	NM & RS	Territories
Allen	9	47	23	22 (2)	2	0	1
Blyth	2	9	3	6	0	1	0
Blyth Estuary	2	8	6	2	1	0	1
Browney	7	46	7	39	11	0	3
Derwent Tyne	10	59	13	46	10	0	3
Gaunless	3	25	7	18	1	1	1
Leven	2	10	8	2	0	1	0
North Tyne	1	2	2	0	0	0	0
Seaham Peterlee Coast	1	11	10	1	0	1	0
Skerne	3	13	6	7	2	0	1
South Tyne	1	5	3	2	0	1	0
Tees	22	109	46	60 (3)	14	4	5
Tyne	23	131	80	49 (1)	12	1	6
Wansbeck	2	12	3	9	3	1	1
Wear	41	264	126	135	34	0	12
Totals	129*	751	343	398 (6)	90	11	34

*Several patches cover more than one catchment area.

Table 2. 2021 Summary

Surveyed patches	124
Empty patches	82
Otter territories located	34
Reasonable suspicion/near misses	11
Total Adjudicated territories	45

Table 3. All surveys summary

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Patches	93	100	112	119	115	94	123	87	124
Total sites	517	588	608	644	629	516	681	456	751
Sites positive	216	212	260	281	272	224	281	259	398
% sites positive	42	36	42	44	43	43	41	57	53
% sites negative	56	60	53	53	54	53	56	41	46
Hits	59	67	56	78	70	55	82	48	90
Located territories	26	29	27	30	32	24	39	20	34
NM/RS	3	6	9	5	6	5	8	11	11
Adjudicated territories	29	35	36	35	37	29	47	31	45
Adjudicated territories old survey area (VC 66)							40		

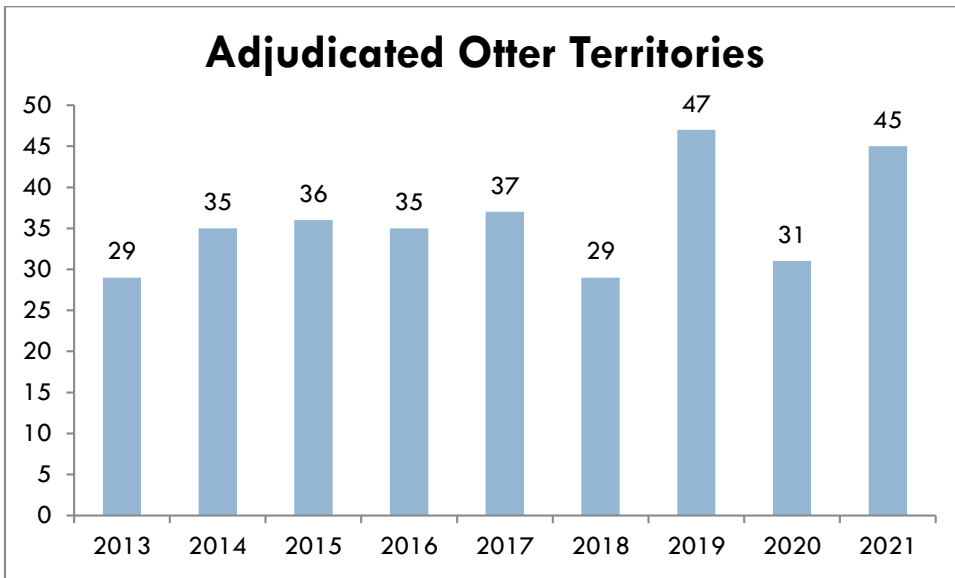


Figure 3. Adjudicated otter territories in nine annual surveys.

From 2019 the survey was 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
	Black Grouse	1
	Blackbird	11
	Blackcap	12
	Black-tailed Godwit	1
	Blue Tit	8
	Bullfinch	6
	Buzzard	14
	Chaffinch	11
	Chiffchaff	24
	Coal Tit	7
	Common Sandpiper	16
	Common Snipe	2
	Common Whitethroat	4
	Cuckoo	1
	Curlew	16
	Dipper	51
	Dunlin	2
	Dunnock	6
	Golden Plover	3
	Goldfinch	9
	Goosander	17
	Great Crested Grebe	1
	Great-Spotted Woodpecker	9
	Great Tit	11
	Green Woodpecker	1
	Greenfinch	2
	Grey Heron	26
	Grey Partridge	1
	Grey Wagtail	32
	Greylag Goose	11
	House Martin	2
	House Sparrow	3
	Jay	5
	Kestrel	8
	Kingfisher	9

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	Lapwing	11
	Linnet	1
	Little Egret	2
	Little-ringed Plover	1
	Long-tailed Tit	4
	Mandarin Duck	4
	Marsh/Willow Tit	5
	Meadow Pipit	2
	Mistle Thrush	4
	Mute Swan	16
	Nightjar	1
	Nuthatch	4
	Oystercatcher	23
	Pied Flycatcher	1
	Pied Wagtail	12
	Raven	1
	Red Grouse	1
	Red Kite	1
	Redshank	4
	Reed Bunting	6
	Ringed Plover	1
	Robin	8
	Rook	1
	Ruddy Shelduck	1
	Sandmartin	12
	Sedge Warbler	1
	Shelduck	5
	Shoveler	1
	Skylark	5
	Song Thrush	8
	Sparrowhawk	5
	Swallow	7
	Tawny Owl	1
	Teal	2
	Treecreeper	6
	Tree Sparrow	1
	Tufted Duck	4
	Wigeon	2

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	Willow Warbler	15
	Wood Warbler	1
	Wren	18
	Yellowhammer	4
	Yellow Wagtail	3
Mammals	Badger (tracks/setts/latrine)	4
	Bank Vole	1
	Brown Hare	9
	Brown Rat	7
	Deer (tracks/latrine)	8
	Fallow Deer (visual)	1
	Grey Squirrel (visual)	7
	Hedgehog (visual/scat)	2
	Mink (tracks/scat)	17
	Mink (visual)	3
	Muntjac Deer (visual)	1
	Rabbit (visual)	10
	Red Fox (tracks/scat)	4
	Red Fox (visual)	2
	Roe Deer (visual)	16
	Shrew (visual)	1
	Stoat (visual)	3
	Stoat/Weasel (visual)	1
	Vole (visual)	1
	Water Vole (visual)	1
	Weasel (visual)	1
Amphibian	Toad (spawn)	3
	Toad (visual)	3
Insects	7-spot Ladybird	1
	Bee-fly	2
	Buff-tailed Bumblebee	4
	Drinker-moth Caterpillar	1
	Early Bumblebee	1
	Orange Tip butterfly	4
	Peacock butterfly	2
	Purple Thorn moth	1
	Red-tailed Bumblebee	1
	Small Tortoiseshell butterfly	2

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	Speckled Wood butterfly	3
	Tawny Mining Bee	2
	Tree Bumblebee	1
	White-tailed Bumblebee	2
	Yellow Dung Fly	1
Plant	Bluebell	4
	Butterbur	4
	Common Dog Violet	5
	Cowslip	4
	Cuckoo Flower	2
	Dog's Mercury	2
	Forget-me-not	1
	Germander Speedwell	1
	Honesty	1
	Kingcup	1
	Lesser Celandine	4
	Primrose	3
	Ramsons	5
	Red Campion	1
	Wood Anemone	6
	Wood Sorrel	3
* Number of records not number of individuals		