



## March 2015 Newsletter

### 1. Upcoming events

### 2. Members News

### 3. Recent sightings

### 4. Updates from home and abroad

#### 1. *Upcoming events*

It's that time of year again. Vivien Kent is busily making preparations for the third countywide otter survey of Durham. The survey will take place on the weekend on the 25th-26th of April 2015. Training events have been taking place and a team of much appreciated volunteers are preparing to survey more than 100 stretches of river across the region.

This year, Tees Valley Wildlife Trust are taking part so we will also begin to build a picture of otter presence in Teeside.

If you are located in Northumberland, we also encourage you to get involved. We have not got the people power to survey countywide but please get in touch if you want to survey your own patch over the two days. We will provide you with a handful of sites and provide your records to our data centre ERIC, located in the Great North Museum Hancock.

All records are so important for building up a picture of otters in the north east.

#### 2. *Members news*

- Quite a lot has happened since the last newsletter. Sian Jones, has left the board due to a move back to her roots in the northwest. Her replacement is Deborah Toward. Deb has added a much needed boost to getting events organised and keeping Vivien and I (Lizzie) on track when work is taking our attention elsewhere. You can find out more about Deb on the website and you are sure to meet her if you attend any of our events.

- We have held two otter watches this winter. The first was held in December and we were hoping for an early Christmas present. Deb has a wonderful knowledge of the river close to where she lives in County Durham and suggested that we head to a bridge overlooking the river to see what we could see. We only want to take small groups on the watches and 6 of us braved the sharp, piercing wind. We welcomed David Burton, an avid member of the group along with Suze and Naun, myself (Lizzie), Chris Jackson and Deb. Naun usually spends his time as a tour guide in the Pantanal looking for giant otter so both the climate and the relatively small size of our hard to spot wildlife were a bit of a shock. We spent an hour and half on the bridge and Chris had what he thought was a glimpse of an otters back for less than 5 seconds. A little disheartened and with very old fingers and toes, Deb welcomed us with cake and hot drinks while we looked through some images and footage of otter as well as some spraint and footprints from a very large dog otter, Marley (more about him later). We also had a look at the very limited number of books on the market and Deb shared her copy of the new Oxon Otter of the World book which is definitely worth a buy if you like otters as much as we do.

## Happy Otter Spotters



The second event was held on Valentines day 2015. Again 6 of us headed to the river, downstream of our December attempt. We didn't hold out much hope as Deb had been monitoring the behaviour of the otters (a female and her year old cubs) and had found that they were much harder to spot, appearing at strange times of day or not being seen for several days at a time. We walked the river and saw nothing but a dipper. We then split into three groups and watched the river for around 30 minutes. Nothing ..... We then took a look at a holt site with a pile of spraint including crayfish remains. This location cannot be made available to people local to the area due to protection issues but as Julia Porter and her brother were visiting us from further afield we took the opportunity to show them a holt site. We decided to have one last look out onto the river and Julia spotted the female fishing on her own. We spent the next hour watching her fish along 200m of river. Members of the public joined us occasionally, including a very enthusiastic fisherman who reported otter swimming all around him while he fished using chest waders. Julia and her brother left us and Deb provided us with a wonderful tomato soup while we had a sub-committee debrief.

## More happy otter spotters



- In January we were delighted to provide a talk to the Haydon Bridge Wildlife Group. They were very welcoming with lots of homemade cakes and tea. Around 40 people attended the talk and they very generously donated a sum of money to us which is safely in bank. The talk lasted about an hour and introduced the ideas behind The Otter Network and touched on research that we have completed to date. It was a wonderful evening surrounded by wildlife enthusiasts and we very much look forward to keeping in touch with the group and their activities.

- If you want to take part in an otter watch or would like us to provide a talk to a local group please let us know and we will do what we can.

- We have played with some new merchandise. We have magnets (the size of business cards) available for £1 for members and £2 for non-members which you can get at events and talks.



- Members have suggested that annual membership fees should be increased from £2.50. There is some resistance from board members because we want the membership of the group to be open for all.

We are considering a tiered membership where you can choose from a range of options so if you can pay more there will be the option to. For example a bronze, silver, gold membership. This will be discussed at the AGM in the autumn and we look forward to hearing your thoughts.

- If you would like to see more options for membership or like the idea of merchandise please let us know. We are hoping to work with some local artists to provide cards and other little gifts but if you don't want them, then there isn't much point!

### 3. Recent sightings

We have had a steady trickle of records throughout the winter months with several records from along the Tyne. We had a report of three otters at the mouth of the Ouseburn before Christmas and a report of two adult otters with a smaller otter at Wylam in recent weeks.

One of our members reports regular sightings on the Tees including the presence of cubs and we also receive regular records of spraint and prints on the Wear from a further member.

We have had an unusual record from the centre of Darlington. A local lollipop man outside of primary school observed an otter confidently crossing the main road towards a bus stop, expecting traffic to stop for it before turning round and heading for a small stream within a residential estate. At first we thought that perhaps there was something wrong with the otter but it has been seen making the same journey on more than one occasion. It would be an interesting project to get the school involved in otter spotting and see what they observe.

Along with the healthy number of live sightings we have also had a number of records of road traffic collisions. As long term members know, we collect as many carcasses as we can to send to Cardiff as part of their dissection programme which investigates everything from contaminant levels in organs to the weight of the animal to the size of its skull. Approximately 3 otters have been collected in the Hexham area. Two otters in the Wylam area were unable to be located when we went to collect them. A small number of otters have been collected from Durham. A single otter has been unable to be recovered from the Amble area. Very sadly, two records of young cubs have been reported; one as a

road traffic accident and one with the cause of death unknown and very little of the animal left. We are due to send another group of animals to Cardiff in coming weeks.

A further road casualty was reported from the Hepscoth area, which brings me back to Marley who I mentioned earlier.

We received an email from the Marley family at Hepscoth who had collected a very recently dead otter from a road between Morpeth and Hepscoth. They reported it was very big. So we went to collect him and he was probably the biggest animal that we have recovered. The Marley family were very interested to hear what happened to their otter and full post mortem results will be made available to them when he is sent down to Cardiff. We are very grateful that they recovered him as we have a problem with disappearing otters - by the time we get to them they have gone.

We were able to take casts of Marleys feet in plaster of paris which we can show to people at our events.

#### *4. Home and abroad*

Unfortunately we do not have any students working on projects with us this year. Last year's project on otter mortality hotspots has been completed and will be made available on the website when sensitive data has been removed.

Between the 8-11 June 2015 the European Otter Workshop will be held in Stockholm. Hopefully one of the board will be able to make it over.

We received news from Holland over Christmas time that 2 lactating females had been killed in road traffic collisions. The immediate worry was for the dependent cubs that would be in holt somewhere nearby. Following an intense search of the surrounding area lasting many days, cubs were heard calling and were rescued. The IUCN otter specialist group is looking to provide guidance on how a search should be carried out when a lactating female is found.

I will wrap up this newsletter with an image of one of the cubs rescued in the Netherlands that I hope will make you smile (although very belated). Once again, many thanks to everyone for their commitment to the otters of the northeast, your photos and records. Please, please encourage others to join. The more dosh the more fun things we can organise. Your money has not been used for the creation of the website, any promotional materials, DNA work or report writing. All of this has been financed by The Otter Network Founder members (me and Viv).

Happy otter spotting.

Lizzie and the team

From the Netherlands

