

www.theotternetwork.co.uk

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October 2017

Hello to everyone on our mailing list,

Update

First things first - if you're not sure why you are on our mailing list and would like your email removed, please reply to this email and we will sort that out for you. For those that have previously enjoyed sharing our updates, you will be aware that it has been quite some time since we have sent out a group email/e-letter or requested membership payment. Membership payment is indeed on hold for the moment!

While we have not sent out regular information, this does not mean we have been sitting idle - oh No!!!! It also does not mean that we do not value the input of our wonderful members.

We have continued to collate records of otter sightings and collect otter carcasses which are sent to Cardiff University as part of their long running project. Viv has provided an overview of our on-going relationship with Cardiff University's Otter Project within this update.

In addition, Viv continues to work extremely hard co-ordinating the Durham Otter Survey which uses volunteer surveyors to cover a very large area searching for otter spraint over a single weekend (see below a full summary of the exciting work so far). The event is run through Durham Wildlife Trust and the results are reported by Viv on the Otter Network website and wider mediums.

The website has largely been kept up to date and there are a number of new requests, links and details of our forthcoming otter walk at the end of October.

We have also continued to receive a good number of sightings through the website which means that people are so excited about their records that they are actively going online to Google where to send them. For us this is validation that the website is both used and useful. Other avenues of records reporting can be more difficult to find in an internet search and we endeavour to send all records to our local records provider so they will be available as a resource for the general public.

Otter walk

We have an otter walk scheduled for the end of this month. It is a new location in Durham. So if you fancy a walk, a chat and possibly a chance to see otters and their signs, please join us on Saturday the 28th of October. The meeting time is around 4pm and we have a limited number of places still available. Full details will be sent out a few days before the walk and we look forward to meeting you/ seeing you again.

Donations

Earlier this year we received a donation from RJ McLeod. They were the principle contractor working on Ray Windfarm constructed near Otterburn, Northumberland. Lizzie was able to visit the wind farm (to rescue a bat from the canteen among other things!) and while it is always difficult to see development of upland habitats, the appearance was of an organised project which paid due regard to a whole range of wildlife from birds of prey to crayfish. We were very grateful to receive the donation which should pay for the hosting of the website for at least 18 months.

(Please note: as a group we do not make comment on planning matters, we are not a consultee. Our focus is on collecting data and engaging the wider public.)

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Facebook

Viv has been a trooper of late and has also set us up a Facebook group, those who use such technologies please search the Otter Network in Facebook or follow the link from our website.

It is a closed group due to the status of Otter as a European Protected species. Vivien will be reviewing the requests to join and checking against the membership/mailling list.

(Please note that Vivien will act as an administrator for the page and there may be occasion where it is deemed that inappropriate information has been posted, such as breaches of data confidentiality etc, and as such she reserves the right to remove unsuitable posts.)

5th DWT Annual Spring Otter Survey

The 5th DWT Annual Spring Otter Survey took place over the weekend of 22nd/23rd April this year with over 120 people once again giving their time to look for signs of otters on their allocated survey patch. Excitingly, there were no less than five visual sightings of otters over the weekend which is definitely a record.

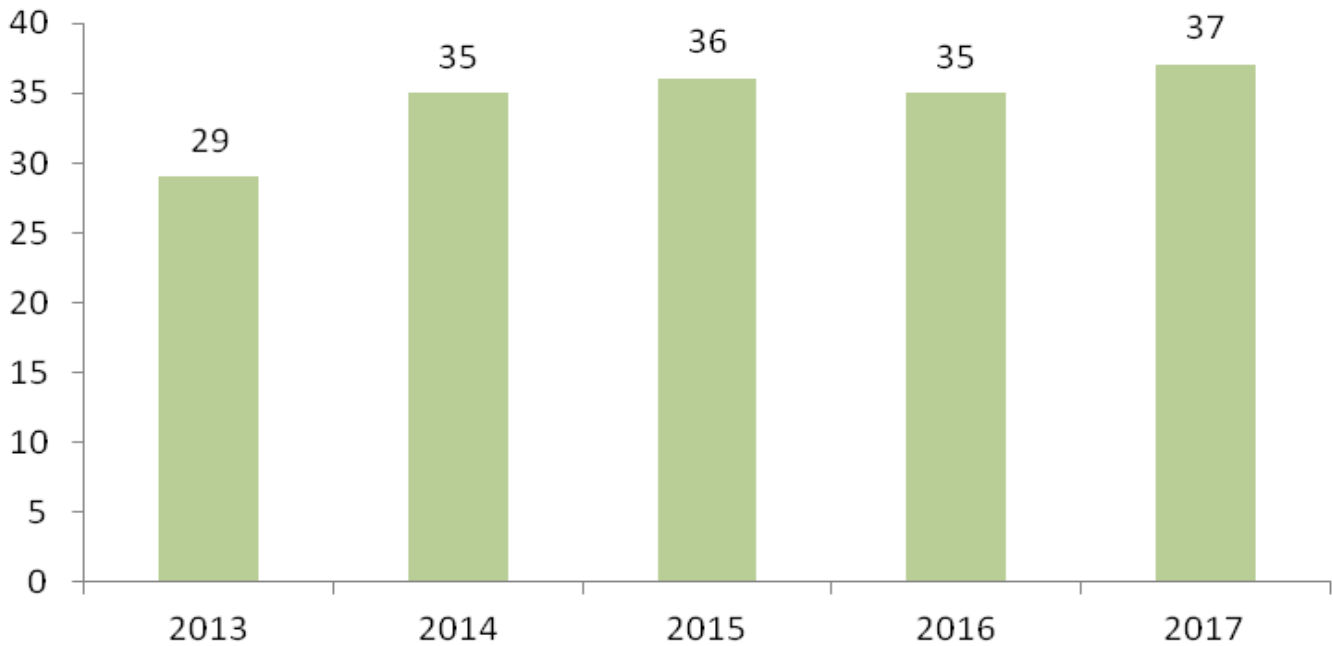
In total, over 600 sites were checked throughout the DWT and Tees Valley Wildlife Trust areas on both the Saturday and Sunday mornings - 43% of which were positive for otter signs.

Checking the same sites on consecutive days effectively 'freezes' the activity of our otter population on one night of the year allowing us to estimate the minimum number of active territories in the survey area. We do this by looking at the grouping of the 'hit' sites. Where we get several 'hits' close together on the same watercourse they are assumed to belong to one territory. If they occur on different watercourses, and it is unlikely an otter could have travelled between the two in one night, they are classified as separate territories. There is obviously a level of subjectivity in this but we always err on the side of caution and it is the only way we can get any kind of numerical data for otters to monitor their population. It must be emphasised that we are counting approximate territories and not the number of individual otters.

We identified 37 active territories this year which is two more than last year and one more than 2015 (see chart below). The number of territories has been pretty similar throughout the five-year history of the survey suggesting the otter population is quite stable at the moment. How this relates to the population level before the crash it is difficult to say as we do not have any data from that time. However, it is likely that the population is still lower due to habitat loss and the fact that some of our watercourses have still not recovered sufficiently to support a top predator. It is important that we keep monitoring however so that we can pick up any sign of decline before it becomes serious.



Adjudicated Otter territories



Mink

Mink numbers appear to be on rise with records of breeding activity on many of the river networks. Without wanting to be 'species-ist', mink only exist in the wild due to inappropriate release of, or escaped, animals from trade in furs etc. They are not part of our natural river ecosystem though they do often affect the balance of our native species.

We would be grateful to receive sightings of mink or their field signs. You will see on the website that their prints can be confused with that of a juvenile otter. However, mink scat (poo) stinks, it may be twisted and tapers to a fine point. If in doubt, send us a photo if you can!

Paws for thought (pun intended!)

As a team we work very hard and entirely at our own cost to collect otters which are reported dead, either on the roads or, in any other circumstances. We then receive a small amount of funding to courier the animals to Cardiff University (CUOP). Once at Cardiff the animals go for post-mortem. This achieves so much more than a probable cause of death, notes are made on everything from nose to tip of tail (both outside and inside). This feeds into a huge body of data collected over 2.5 decades from over 2000 otter carcasses collected from the UK and parts of Europe. This is thousands of data points relating to everything from age and breeding status to battle scars to liver contaminants. We feel that this is a much more fitting end for such a magnificent creature than being left to decompose in a road verge. Below is a write up by Viv of what we, DWT, the EA and CUOP have achieved in the northeast region so far.

At Durham Wildlife Trust we have been recording road kill and other dead otters since 2012 and in 2015, in collaboration with Lizzie, we started collecting (where possible) and coordinating carcasses from all over

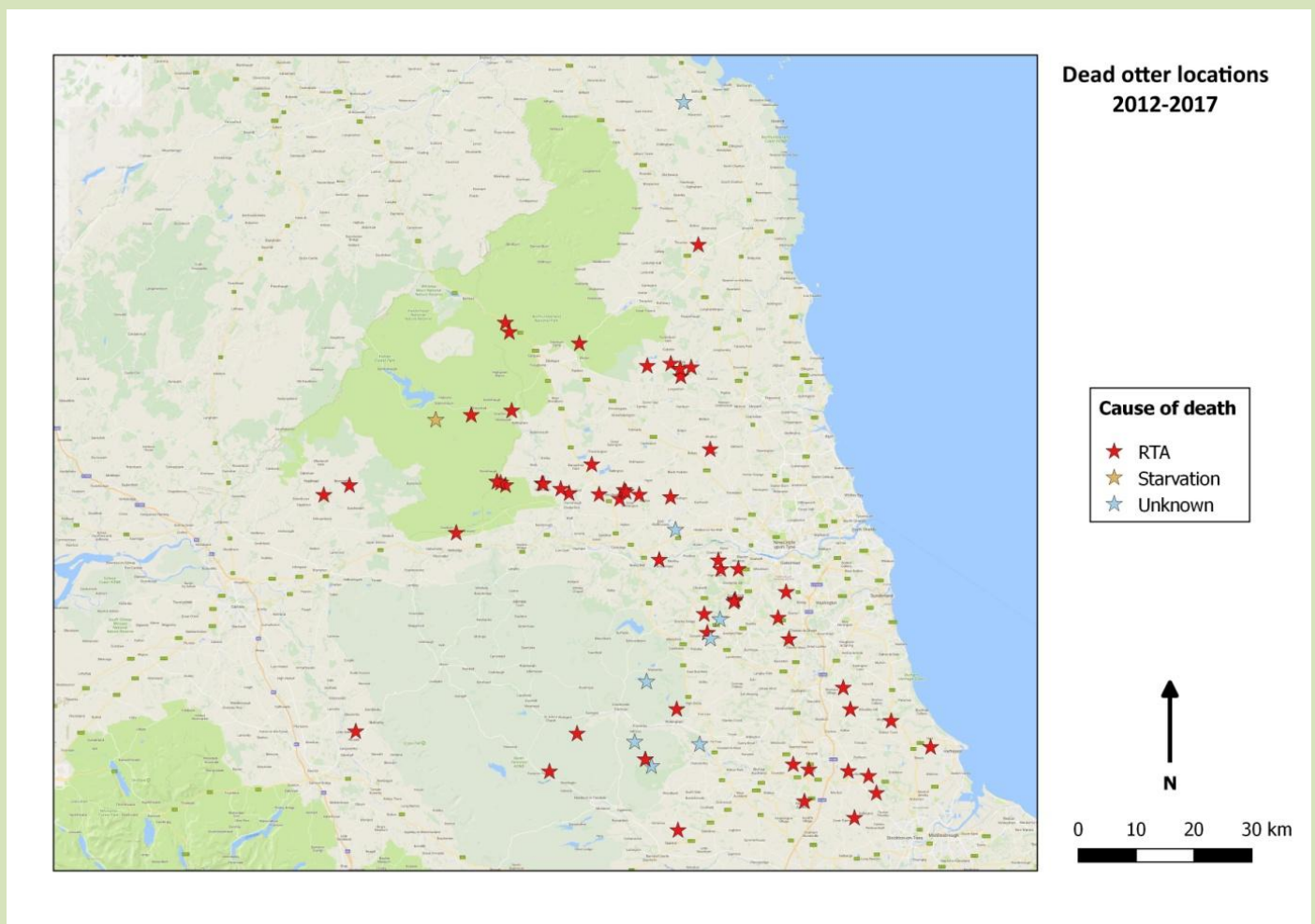
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the north east to send to the Cardiff University Otter Project (CUOP) <http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/otter-project> for post mortem. We do this in conjunction with the Environment Agency and CUOP who kindly contributed a freezer so that we would be able to store them.



In the two years we have been doing this we have collected and sent 41 otter carcasses to Cardiff for post mortem. Nearly all have turned out to have died as a result of a collision with a vehicle, but a couple appear to have survived previous injuries which may or may not have occurred naturally. One point to highlight however is that otters that are killed on roads are more likely to be found as they are easily seen. We rarely find otters that have died in other ways as they will decompose in the wider countryside without ever being recorded. This bias may affect our knowledge of otter life expectancy as many otters that die in RTAs are younger animals dispersing to find their own territories.



The map below shows the locations of all the otter casualties we have recorded since 2012. As a network we would ask you to please report your sightings and if you are feeling brave, collect the animal using gloves and we will come and get it.

It is completely illegal to own an otter whether dead or alive, this includes owning any of its parts. We do have dead otters which 'go missing' within as little as 30 minutes of them being reported. This is very frustrating as so much valuable information is lost. If you collect an animal on our behalf you will be legally protected under licence as part of the courier agreement with Cardiff.

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Deb our Treasurer

The eagle-eyed among you may have noticed that our Treasurer Deb has had a change of surname from 'Toward' to 'Nicholson'. As a group we extend our congratulations to her and her partner on their marriage.

Other

We are thinking through the pro's and con's of a paid membership. The donation to become a member is nominal but does help a little towards website overheads (the remainder of which is funded by the team). We are looking into the option of asking for donations for events run by us and talks that we give to local groups. That then throws open what you would like to give/ are able to give at different times of year etc. Please let us know if you have any strong opinions.