# **SURVEY RESULTS 2024**

Somerset Otter Group, summary of the James Williams Survey, 2 day Event.

# **Two-Day Survey 2025**

Next years two-day event will take place on:

#### 29th & 30th March 2025

2024 was the second year of an earlier survey due to warmer springs causing vigorous bankside vegetation. 2025 will also be early spring, but we will keep the timings under review.

### Weather conditions

Weather conditions were fair during the survey weekend, although, previous heavy rain meant some river levels were still high.

This impacted on some of the surveys, but not significantly across the county.

### **Hawk & Owl Trust**

This year we were very pleased that the Hawk and Owl Trust joined our survey at their Shapwick Moor NNR site. They were rewarded by their efforts in finding fresh spraint. Thank you Alex and the hard working volunteer team.



The 2024 Somerset Otter Group survey took place on 23<sup>rd</sup> & 24<sup>th</sup> March. In recent years wetter and warmer weather conditions earlier in the year have caused lush riparian vegetation making access to riverbanks difficult and, in some cases, causing sprainting places to be covered and unused. This primarily affects the extensive low lying areas of Somerset. The higher grounds tend not to be impacted, particularly Exmoor that can have frosts and snows during March and April. Happily this year conditions were mostly good across the county during the survey weekend.

53 patches were covered across the county - a total of 248 sites. 43% of sites had some signs and 39 sites or 16% of total sites had fresh signs.

33 ranges were identified - an absolute minimum. However, as in the previous years, surveyor numbers were low and not all sites were covered and thus not all ranges identified. Of the sites covered 16% had fresh signs, compared to the highest percentage in 2001 of 32% and the lowest of 13% in the years 2006, 2014, 2016 and 2022.

# **Surveyor numbers**

New surveyors are needed across all catchments. Please contact Jo Pearse on sogjopearse@gmail.com if you are or know of anyone interested in monitoring their local otter population.

### **Cubs**

Two reports of cubs were added to SOG's breeding records. A record can be a sighting by the surveyor or from a trail camera; from information passed on by locals whilst surveying or a best guess whilst surveying due to different size padding or spraints. If you'd like a second opinion do send photos to Jo Pearse or post on SOG's facebook page.

# Sites not surveyed

Other than some localised flooding, other issues may cause a site to be unsurveyed.

As always it is important you consider the risk of conducting you surveys. If in doubt, it is better to miss the site and record on your form the problem. The Environment Agency should be informed of any issues with the bank or water quality.

Some sites this year were affected by construction works meaning they were not surveyed.

### **Trail Cameras**



During the survey weekend Mel Keating's camera captured this healthy looking individual.

Trail cameras can provide a great contribution to the survey, providing indisputable proof of a 'hit' (fresh spraint, padding or other signs confirming the overnight presence of an otter).

Cameras can capture previously unknown otter behaviour and are useful in assessing our own methodology - whilst a fresh spraint indicates presence, a lack of spraint does not indicate a lack of presence. Cameras have shown that otters can also urinate to scent mark.

Tony House captured the image of this posing young beaver on his trail camera. His footage over the last few years has shown some fascinating cross species interactions.



Two Da	v Data	1995	- 2024
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Month	MAY	MAY	MAY	MAY	MAY	MAY	ОСТ	MAY	MAY	MAY	APR	MAY	MAY	APR	APR	APR	APR	APR	APR	APR	APR	APR	MAR	MAR							
Year	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
								F&M													spate						C-19	C-19			
Patches				31								58	65	69	109	129	121	124	127	143	135	138	139	137	138	122			91	72	53
Total Sites			114	145	166	174	132		121	126	275	239	271	309	428	520	521	477	519	564	524	510	531	496	496	473			388	287	248
Sites Positive			84	98	100	124	78		56	96	198	169	197	227	306	381	380	318	331	390	273	372	304	326	243	249			161	118	112
% Sites Positive			73	67	60	71	59		46	75	72	69	73	74	71	73	73	66	64	69	52	73	57	66	49	52			42	41	45
Hits	9	11	18	39	26	42	42		27	26	71	30	35	68	99	95	109	91	76	114	68	102	71	89	71	63			51	43	39
Near Misses	8		7	11	17	11				14	7	8	6	11	16	17	30	16	26	22	18	25	19	21	19	8			9	8	3
Total Scores	17	11	25	50	43	53			27	40	78	38	41	79	115	114	139	107	102	136	86	127	90	110	90	71			60	51	42
Located	15	16	25	32	37	34			21	30	54	39	32	44	54	59	66	66	55	64	47	66	50	66	56	56			38	32	32
Adjudicated Ranges											54	50	45	45	65	62	69	69	67	67	56	66	56	66	56	56			39	34	33
% Total sites with Hits			16	27	16	24	32		22	20	25	12	13	22	23	18	21	19	15	20	13	20	13	18	14	13			13	15	16
% Positive Sites with Hi	ts		21.4	39.7	26	33.8	53.8		48.2	27	35.8	17.7	17.7	29.9	32.3	24.9	28.6	28.6	22.9	29	25	27	23	27	29	25			31	36	34
Blank Patches		5	1								4			5	6	10	8	8	15	9	22	10	25	20	30	26			23	22	12

During this years survey, 53 patches were covered. Fewer than last year and much lower than peak coverage in 2013 (143 patches covered). Of the 53, 12 had no signs of otter. A total of 248 sites were surveyed. The adjudicated ranges came in at 33.

TWO D	AY EVE	NT OT							
yr sp	bittern	cuckoo	dipper	g.wagtail	kingfisher	l. egret	mink	w. vole	beaver
2015	2	0	16	5	5	2	14	4	
2016	2	0	18	5	5	1	3	3	
2017	0	0	15	7	7	4	0	0	
2018	1	2	14	4	4	4	4	2	
2019	0	1	15	3	3	0	7	0	
2022	2	1	7	15	10	3	11	3	2
2023	0	0	5	4	8	2	9	1	4
2024	2	0	2	2	5	0	8	6	3

Low figures for some species are due to less surveyors in the field, although dipper numbers are concerning and reflects the current downward trend in the UK. Mink were present across the catchments and seem set to stay. Nice to see water vole numbers increasing. This could be due to site specific conservation measures. The presence of beavers is a positive newcomer amongst other apparent declines.

# **MINI NEWSLOTTER 2024**

# A round up of 2023

### Wilder Wedmore 2023



In June 2023, SOG had a stall at Wilder Wedmore, a festival of nature.



## Other groups 2023

Training was delivered at Shapwick Heath's Hawk and Owl Trust. Many thanks to Alex and the volunteers.

SOG met up with Greater Bristol Otter Group at the start of the year to share news and plans.

## Impacts of weather

2023 saw some very challenging weather for otters. In January, there was widespread flooding followed by ten days of sub zero temperatures. Fields, roads and properties were flooded which then froze, causing otter feeding behaviour to become disrupted.

Sadly during this time, cubs were displaced from their mothers. Wildlife Rescue charity Secret World completed two cub rescues on different water courses on the Brue catchment.

SOG surveyors assisted with a cub search down very icy droves. Thank you to Dylan for his help. Sadly, a third cub was not located.

During floods, high water volume and flow scoured river banks, altering the riparian habitat. Generations of otters have sheltered amongst the roots of the mature oak photographed below. Sadly, the eroded bank unstablised the oak and caused it to fall.



### **Dead otters 2023**

In 2023 30 dead otters were reported across Somerset. This is a number within normal parameters. Of those, 11 were collected by SOG members and others, eventually for post mortem by Cardiff University. Transfer to Cardiff was carried out by SOG surveyors. A special thanks to Dylan for the transfer after an accidental defrosting of the freezer!

There was no reports of dead otters from the Exe or Frome catchments, but five from the Tone, eleven from the Parrett, nine from the Brue, one from the Quantock / coastal streams area, one from the Cale and four from the North Axe.

Five of the 30 dead otters, or 16% were reported from the M5 motorway.

In February 2023, a live but injured and emaciated otter was rescued by Secret World from Shapwick. It was in such poor health, the vet decided to euthanise. SOG arranged for a special post mortem by Alex Barlow, MRCVS, Wildlife Network for Disease Surveillance. The male otter was found to be in poor body condition with a shrunken gallbladder and thickened gallbladder and bile duct walls. The otter had a heavy infestation of bile flukes consistent with *Pseudamphistomum trancatum*.

# **Breeding 2023**

Nine records were gathered during 2023 of otter breeding. Two from the Tone, one from the Parrett, six from the Brue and one from the Frome.

Two of the records were cubs separately rescued by Secret World and one was from an otter cub death record. These are still added to our records as evidence of breeding.

### Fisheries advice

Once or twice every year we are contacted by people concerned about fish kills on their domestic ponds and commercial fisheries. Owners make contact to find out more information about the affects an otter might have on their fish stock. We take concerns seriously and can offer advice on predatory species and protecting stocks.

# Thank you!

Many thanks to all Somerset Otter Group surveyors and friends.

Many thanks to Secret World and RSPCA West Hatch for storing dead otters.

