

# 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:

**29<sup>th</sup> & 30<sup>th</sup> 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](mailto: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.





# 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 unstabilised 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 truncatum*.

## 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.

