

TWO DAY CO-ORDINATED SURVEYS OF SOMERSET

Somerset Otter Group research papers, 2010

The Somerset Otter Group started its series of annual 2 day surveys in 1995. From incomplete and tentative beginnings they now cover most of the major waterways of the county, and comparison of the results of the recent, fuller surveys gives a valuable estimation of the strength of the otter population in this area.

Method: Volunteers, having been trained, are allocated a stretch of river to monitor. Many of them survey it monthly for the Otter Group, so get to know it well; others just turn out once a year for the big event. Each surveyor looks at a representative set of sites across their allocated patch on the Saturday. They do not undertake to search the whole length for every possible bit of evidence, but just to check the known places that frequently produce otter signs. On the Sunday they do their chosen sites again, and record any instances of new evidence, which were definitely deposited in the intervening night. In 2009 520 sites were checked, from 129 different patches. The location of all the fresh evidence is mapped, under two headings: definite hits, and near misses. A hit is the definite finding of a new sign; a near miss is when there was fresh indication of an otter's presence on the Saturday, but no new evidence on the following morning. By careful consideration of the information on the map, an estimation can be made of the number of different places where an otter was present on the night of the survey. This is of course not the same as the number of otters; the method allows only one otter at each positive stretch. That nobody can argue with; there was at least the one. But estimates of the presence of cubs, or of a dog and a bitch together, say, are too subjective and open to query, so although noted as a comment, these are not recorded in the scoring.

Reliability: This method cannot over-record the otter population, but is bound to be to some extent an underestimation of the true position out on the rivers: there will be odd otters in improbable places, and insecure otters not sprainting, in order to conceal themselves, although these may of course be detected by padding. There are also inevitable gaps in our cover, but we are aware of those, and can allow for them. The results can be validated by cross reference to our other surveys, and to local knowledge from fishermen etc. So far no great discrepancies have been revealed in this way, and the fact that our scores are not erratic or haphazard, but consistent with themselves over a period of years, suggests that they are a steady record, not just pot-luck. Our 2 Day events are reliable enough to detect population trends or to detect any major collapse, either across the county or in an individual catchment. They give an accurate picture of the range of the area occupied by otters, having measured the gradual spread of recruitment from the west as the otters recovered from the disastrous collapse, and they show that they are now present in all parts of our county. They also give some degree of estimation of the numerical strength and density of the adult population.