

NEWSLOTTER

Somerset Otter Group Summary of Results and Work 2021

Two day Event

23rd & 24th April 2022

This years weekend survey will take place on the 23rd & 24th April 2022.

If you know anyone who would like to take part please email Jo Pearse on

sogjopearse@gmail.com



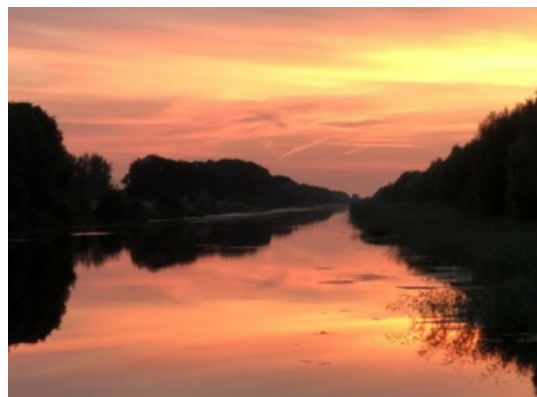
Tony House, surveyor and coordinator in the River Frome catchment area found this wonderful shot on his trail camera memory recently - an otter sniffing a beaver gnawed tree! We would love to hear from anyone who has a trail camera set up on waterways, with information from the 23rd and 24th April, even if they are not part of the group.



It's been a relatively quiet year for the Somerset Otter Group as we lived through the second pandemic year. We are hoping 2022 will be livelier, so to start, please note the date of our next two day survey. A February email to surveyors will check your availability.

Throughout 2021 there was much media coverage on the condition of the UK's rivers, freshwater ponds and lakes. Sewerage releases, abstractions, damage to Banks, adverse climate events and pollution are combining to put pressure on the ecological health of the UK's waterways leading to an unquantified burden on otters.

It has been two years since the last Somerset Spring Otter Survey and there is some concern about the lack of coordinated monitoring, making 2022 an important year to achieve full coverage across the county. Currently we have some gaps in key areas and will be looking for volunteers to cover.



Sunset on the River Huntspill, Somerset

2021 Cardiff trip



Otter collections

Collecting otters for post mortem is one of the main activities of the Somerset Otter Group. It is usually not as grizzly as it sounds. Mostly it is just a shame to see that a healthy otter has lost its life, often from a blow by a passing motor vehicle.



Organs and samples from Somerset dead otters taken during post mortem have made an important contribution to Cardiff's studies on toxicology, chemical / scent communication and diet. Below is the latest publication on substances known as 'forever chemicals' prevalence in otters.

<https://pubs.acs.org/doi/10.1021/acs.est.1c05410#>

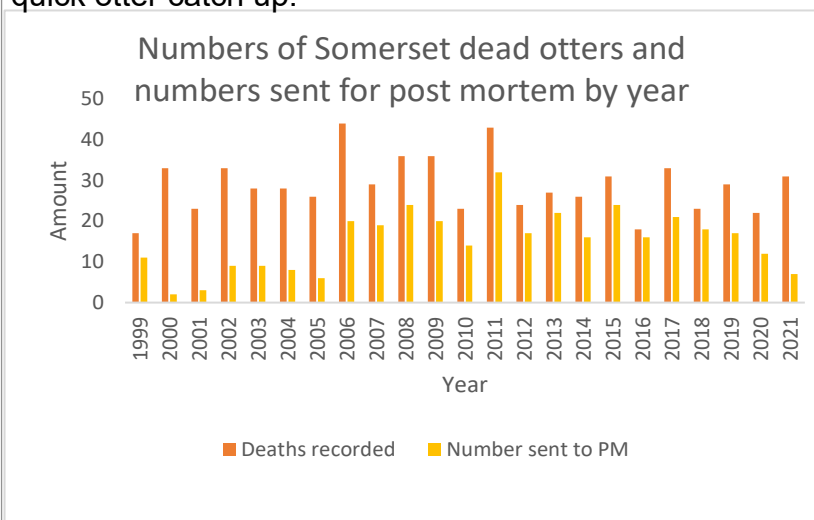
Otter deaths

The year started off sadly with two otters found off road on the Westhay Nature Reserve, their deaths being a week or two apart. Thank you to the reserve workers who delivered these to Secret World. We will hopefully receive the post mortem reports soon.

Dead otters were reported across the county, with a total of 31, a sad but average number. They were found across the catchments - 2 in Somerset Exe, 3 in the coast area, 7 in the Tone, 10 in the Parrett, 8 in the Brue and 1 in the Frome.

Unfortunately only 7 made their way to Cardiff for post mortem. Several were missing when the collector arrived and others were regrettably left due to no available collectors. Several were kindly picked up by the reporter. Thank you! Some couldn't be collected due to their dangerous location such as on the A303, a terribly high number of 4 were killed by road works on the M5 near Junction 24 and two further north. Most of the 31 were road casualties.

Jo Pearse completed two runs to Cardiff University at either ends of the year. On the second run, otters from the Bristol and North Somerset groups GBOG and YACWAG were collected on the way, facilitating the chance for a quick otter catch up.



Ecologists or conservationists often use road kill numbers as an indicator of species abundance or scarcity and in some cases the numbers can be tracked over time to estimate population. For our otters we can see fluctuations in death numbers, with 2006 and 2011 having numbers over 40. Could this indicate a fluctuating population?

General Update

All other business continued through 2021, training new surveyors, giving advice on artificial holt siting, replying to planning concerns and working with the EA on road mitigations. The year ended with a lovely informal catch up with the Greater Bristol Otter Group in Uphill.

Our Chair, Rob Williams continued to work with the Environment Agency on mitigations at Dunball Wharf, the road being an otter road accident black spot due to a lack of access into the Parrett at the wharf.

Collecting carcasses

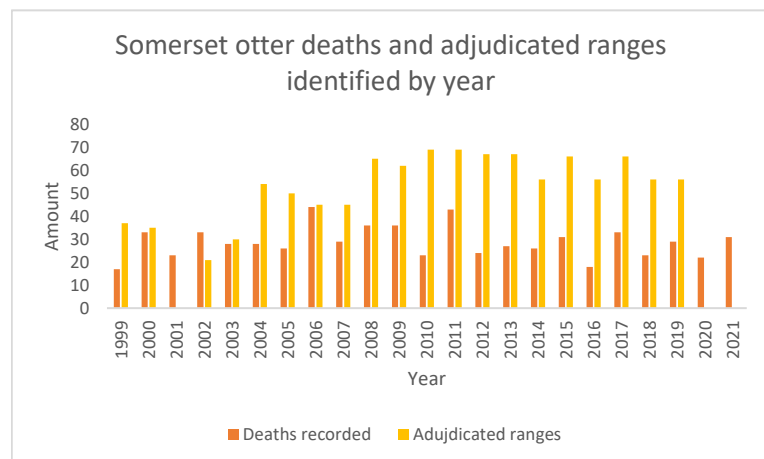
Sometimes, despite our best efforts, otter carcasses are removed before they can be collected.

In keeping with the protected status of the otter, a licence is required to handle any part of a dead otter.

The Somerset Otter Group operates under the licence held by Cardiff University Otter Project when collecting dead otters.

Dead otters continued

We can look at comparisons of otter deaths with our adjudicated otter ranges number. This is the figure that comes from our 2 day survey after mapping the results. It is a very rough number of groups of otters, that may be a single otter or a family group (not a count of otters). It is important to remember the results of the two day survey can be affected by weather and spate conditions of rivers.



Along with national trends we can chart the recovery of otters from the 90's with ranges peaking in 2010 and 2011 and then falling somewhat up to 2019. Unfortunately Covid19 prevented meaningful surveys happening in 2020 and 2021. The survey this year is important to understand if this trend has continued.

We will look at trends in more detail following the survey in 2022.



Otter spraint containing fish roe

Somerset Otter Births and Deaths 2019 and 2020

Useful Contacts

Dead otter reporting via Environment Agency 03708506 506

Environment Agency pollution reporting number 0800 807060

Secret World Wildlife Rescue for injured otters 01278 783250

West Hatch RSPCA Wildlife Rescue for injured otters 03001234 999

Wildlife crime reporting Call 101 or visit your local police station or email ruralandwildlifeunit@avonandsomerset.police.uk

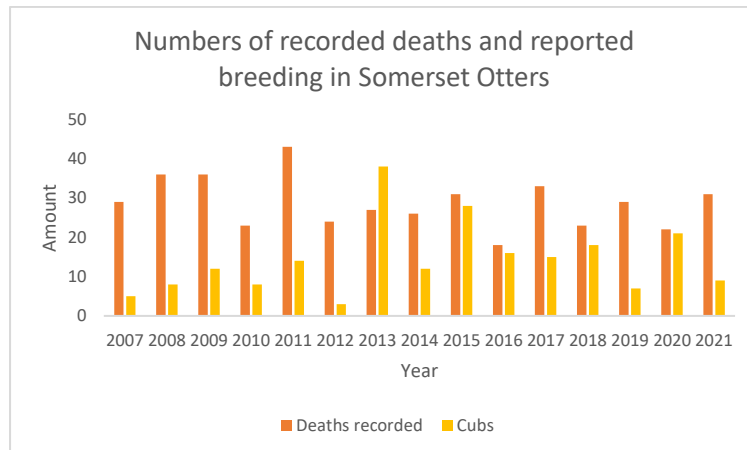
Somerset wildlife reporting <http://www.somerc.com/>

New WhatsApp dead otter collecting group

We are trialling a new WhatsApp group for the collection of dead otters. Currently this is only open for SOG members. The aim is to share the location of dead otters more widely within the group in the hope that someone is close and available to collect. Please do let Jo Pearse know if you would like to join.

Otter Deaths continued

We can also compare these to the breeding data we hold, however our cub data is somewhat haphazard, as the years that no two day survey occur are artificially low due to many reports arriving with the survey returns, we need to consider this quite loosely, although the lack of 2 day data is somewhat offset by local social media being a reliable source of records for breeding.



It's not too late to add to our records, if you have any reports of otter cubs, beaver, mink, or dead otters not already reported, please let Jo Pearse know, it really does matter to our understanding of our Somerset otters. Thank you.



Thanks to Tony House for the above image of a Beaver mother and her kit in Somerset.

Predation

Otters inquisitively explore their territory, wandering away from the main river seeking out sources of food, to locate a mate or a potential holt sites. Sometimes they are chased out by a more fit otter or sometimes they are flushed out by human activity. On their journeys they may come across ponds and lakes. From the otters perspective, these can provide them with a good source of sustenance or be an apparent safe training ground for cubs and juveniles. Whilst for some private pond and lake owners this is a delight, being in an unique position to observe otters, understandably for some this can cause major concern, particularly if the water body is an angling business venture.

Whenever we can, the SOG is happy to engage with fishery owners and water bailiffs. The solutions are not always easy but can provide a discussion point. In 2021 SOG provided advice to fisheries in the wider Parrett and Brue catchments.

Interestingly, one of those was a council owned lake in Highbridge, The Apex Park, a Leisure and Wildlife Park, where a bitch and cubs set up residence. If anyone has any recent sightings of otters there, we would love to know.

Sometimes there is concern about the release of rehabilitated otters and the effects on fisheries. We are not aware of any recent rehabilitated otter releases in Somerset. For information on SOG's position on releases, please read it's recent statement.

<http://www.somersetottergroup.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Otter-Releases-Policy-Statement-PDF-1Feb21.pdf>

Crime & disturbance

Wildlife crime can range from the accidental to the intentional. SOG can support people if they have concerns regarding crime and otters. On the SOG website there are advice sheets produced by SOG on photography and monitoring of otters by trail camera with advice on how to avoid accidental disturbance.

<http://www.somersetottergroup.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Otter-Photography-and-Watching-Position-Statement-Feb21.pdf>

