

# NEWSLOTTER

## Somerset Otter Group Summary of Results and Work - 2022

### Two-day event 2023

This year's two-day event will take place the weekend of the **1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2023**, early this year than previous surveys.

This year the SOG made the decision to hold the survey at the start of April due to early springs causing bank side vegetation growth affecting access, particularly in the low lying areas.

### 2024 News!Otter

Please do submit your photos or ideas for next year's News!Otter by emailing Jo Pearce  
sogjopearse@gmail.com

### New surveyors

We are looking for new surveyors across the county. Let Jo Pearce know if you would like to join the group conducting monthly surveys or taking part in our annual 2 day survey. Or if you are a land owner with cameras set up and would like to contribute to the county's records please get in contact.



Thank you for your continuing efforts in monitoring the otters of Somerset during 2022. We have much more people making use of trail cameras as well as traditional spraint surveys and we are lucky to have local photographers out on the lakes, rivers and rhynes and capturing some great photographs like the one below.

We have continued to provide advice to fisheries and information to the Environment Agency and contribute to SERCS records. Our two day survey remains key as does the monitoring and where possible collection of dead otters. We recorded 7 deaths on the M5 this year, some casualties of the new concrete central barriers.

We have also worked with the RSPCA and Secret World Wildlife Rescue who house our freezer. We have welcomed new surveyors providing training. It certainly feels that the group is getting back to its core aims after the COVID years.



Photo with kind permission of Tinner Tinksy

## Avian Influenza:

### *Feb 2023: H5N1 Avian Influenza and mammals*

It has been reported that the Avian Flu virus has been detected in some otters and fox individuals. Currently, there is no evidence that transmission is from mammal to mammal, but from an individual scavenging a diseased carcass. All current evidence points to it remaining primarily an avian virus. Please take this information as up to date at the time of publishing only. Updates available from DEFRA.

Cardiff University Otter Project has released the following statement:

“So far DEFRA has not released any guidance for those working with mammal carcasses. We believe the risk of contracting H5N1 from otter carcasses is low (because transmission is respiratory, or from scavenging) but we would like to remind everyone of the existing recommendation to wear gloves when collecting otters; as a precaution, we would also suggest that masks be worn. We will keep you updated if any guidelines change.”

As well as following the above advice, as a precaution please do not sniff sample spraints.  
<https://deframedia.blog.gov.uk/2023/02/02/coverage-on-avian-influenza-in-non-avian-wild-mammals/>

## Otters & beavers share Somerset habitat



We won't be asking for caption contest suggestions but this otter does appear to be interested in this beaver gnawed tree. Thanks to Tony House for this fantastic capture. Tony's work in the Frome catchments has been recording beaver and otter behaviour at the same sites, with a tantalising hint that otters may utilise beaver excavated areas.

### Gender data for dead otters

Whilst Cardiff will provide details of the sex of an otter during post mortem, it is helpful to have this information at the time of death / collection, particularly if the otter is not collected to add to SOGs databases.

It can be difficult to tell the sex of an otter as the sexual organs are contained within the skin of the otter. Male otters have a baculum - a bone in the penis. If you press your hand over the area between the anus and up the abdomen often you can feel this, although it does depend on the age of the otter. >60mm would indicate an adult.



The photograph is from an observation of a post mortem at Cardiff University, showing an adult and cub baculum.

Also look out for lactating females with enlarged teats that if squeezed produce milk, this indicates she has young cubs.

## Date for the diary

### Wilder Wedmore



Somerset Otter Group will be having a stall at Wedmore Wilder Festival. Come and say hello.

### New Catchment Coordinator on the Tone

Lucy Pendrick has taken on the role of coordinating coverage and patch allocation. Thanks Lucy! Also thanks to Marc Thole for helping Martin McNeill on the Exe and Coastal Streams catchments as well as Tony House on the Frome.

### Frome Catchment



Tony House has recorded a bitch and sub adult cub on his trail cameras on the Frome catchment.

The well placed camera has also recorded beaver, bullfinch, buzzard, fox, mink, mandarin ducks and many more!

## Mitigation: Beer Wall



Photo by kind permission of Tinner Tinsky

All dead otter information is vital regardless of whether the otter can be collected for post mortem. Whilst it is inevitable that some are killed on the roads, we are able to work with government agencies where there are accident black spots.

We know that high rainfall can force otters up onto the roads, a particular problem in the winter when it is dark during rush hours.

The Environment Agency whilst monitoring river and water course management are able in some instances to make improvements for otters egress where budgets allow.

The river Sowey and Langacre Rhyne flow under the A372 Beer Wall near Othery. Here, major flooding protection engineering constructed several years ago included otter and eel passes. However, during 2022 deaths at the site have prompted the Environment Agency to look at maintenance of the existing works, including clearing the vegetation around the pipe to ensure it is easily accessed by the otters at both ends, checking the otter culvert to make sure it is clear so that otters can travel through. Wire mesh will be added low down on the fence where it is missing to funnel the otters away from the road and towards the tunnels. They will also check that the field gates are closed most of the time and possibly padlocked to prevent otters moving through on to the road. This should really help matters for the otters in that area.

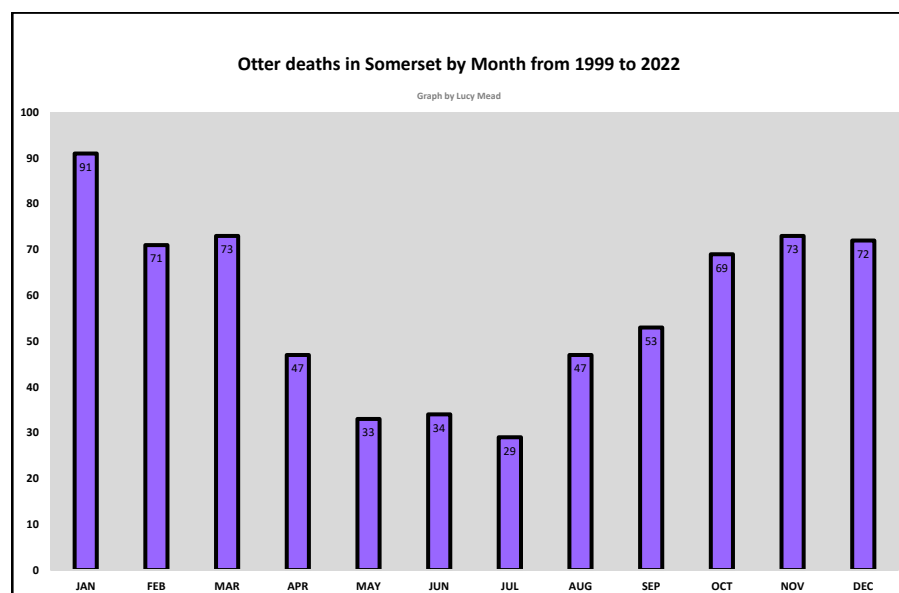
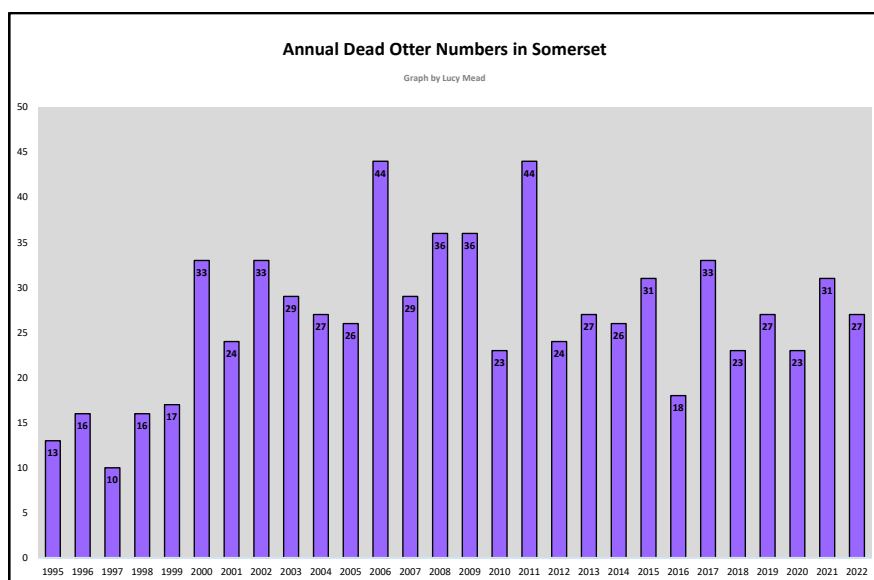
## Dead otters

Lucy Mead has been compiling dead otter data over many years, some of that data is presented below in graphs. A more detailed report including maps was published in 2018 and can be found on our website, go to [www.somersetottergroup.org.uk](http://www.somersetottergroup.org.uk) and select Records and Publications, Dead Otter Reports, and click on the link.

## Dead otters by year and by month

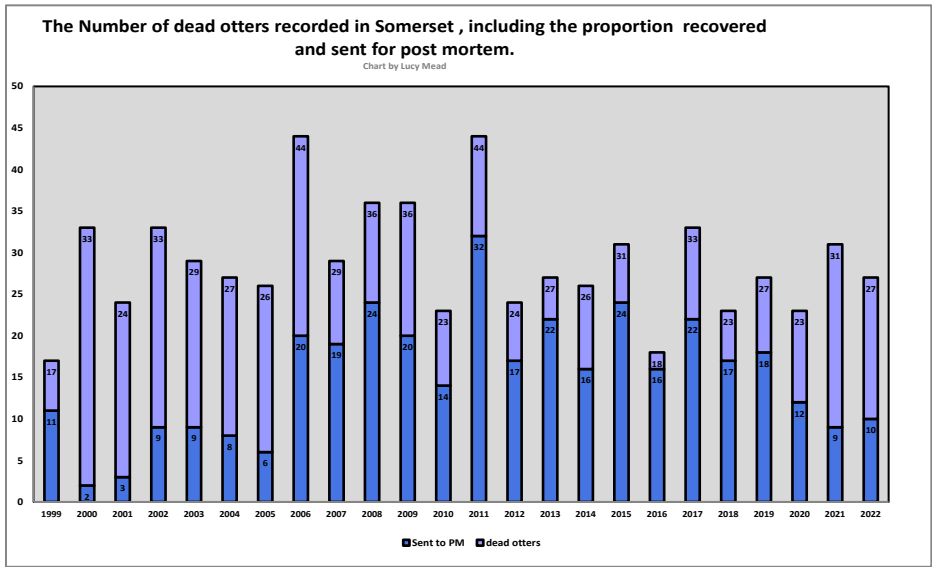
The annual tally of reported deaths has been a similar number over the last few years, with 2016 indicating a problem that was backed up by low numbers indicated during the 2 day survey the same year.

Monthly data clearly indicates an increase in deaths during the winter months caused by the combination of rush hour during darkness, longer nights and higher incidents of rainfall and high waters.

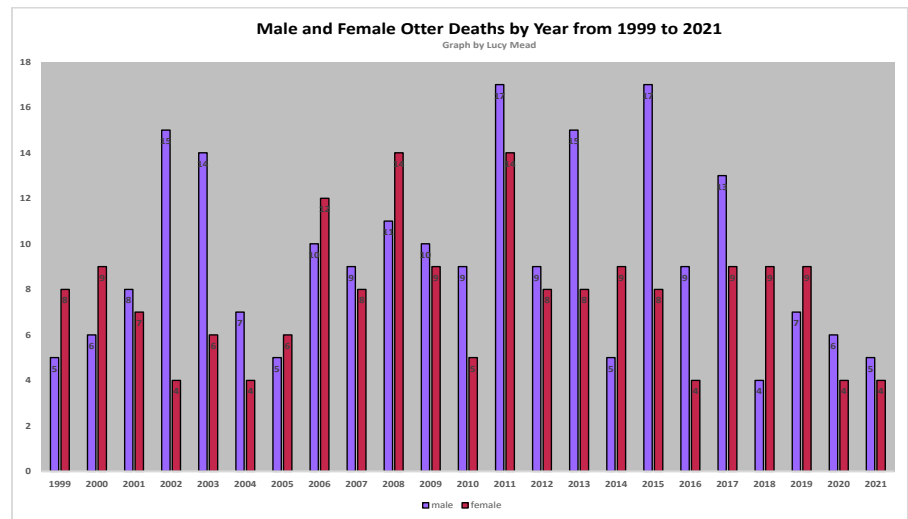




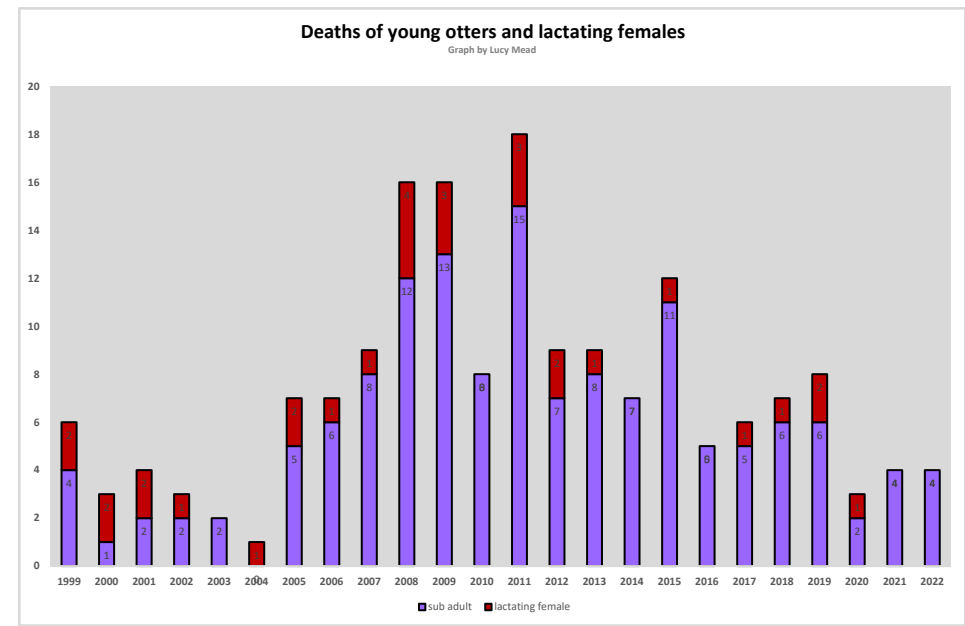
Dead otters



The table below shows the annual reported otters each year in Somerset and proportion collected for post mortem. The average number of otter deaths reported over these years is 28.87.



We do not have gender data for all dead otters reported as some are unable to be collected or viewed. There is much variation from year to year. On average there are 9.1 male otters and 7.9 female otters.



Most years, some of the female otters collected are lactating meaning they are still feeding cubs. It is thought cubs wean at about 6 months, which would leave some very vulnerable cubs to fend for themselves.

To gather this information the otter needs to be examined at the collection point or at Cardiff.

It would be concerning if there were no lactating females. Although sad, it is an indication of breeding.

## Threats

Sometimes threats to otters can be hiding in plain sight. Our well-loved dogs can disturb, chase and attack otters even to the extent of making a kill.

It was sad indeed to receive the confirmation in 2022 that at least one otter was killed by dog attack in late 2021. It was one of two thought to have died this way. Astonishingly, both were from a nature reserve on the levels where dog owners are required to keep their pets on leads. So sad that even on land set aside for nature, otter safety cannot be a surety.

SWT Westhay reserve is now closed to dogs. One result from this is that there are now more daytime sightings on the reserve, viewed by keen sighted people from the hides.



## Pressures

River environments are highly dynamic, the flow of water depositing silt or eroding banks further affecting flow and for the otter, where it chooses to spraint. Human events can also influence the otters behaviour, such as new building development or sites that are dog walking paths. During the pandemic some river side sites became places where people gathered outside more frequently, particularly near population centres.

2022 was warmer and during the summer there was a heat wave and a prolonged summer season altering flows and causing banksides and rivers to become abundant with vegetation. Some river management practices have changed allowing the river vegetation to slow the speed of flow and to create different habitats. This requires the otter surveyor to keep on their toes in terms of sprainting places and safety. Remember to conduct your own risk assessment prior to surveying as risk can change over time.



The top photograph shows the River Brue in the summer of 2022 and the lower one years previously.

## Case Study: Supporting fishery managers and bailiffs in Somerset

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We encourage fisheries with signs of predation, to contact the Somerset Otter Group, as we can offer support and advice, first establishing presence or absence of otters by conducting a survey of the site if required. It is particularly important if you are or know people who are considering setting up a business. The advice will always be to fence.

In 2021, Jo Pearse was contacted by a Somerset fishery manager who thought he might have a predation problem, contact has been maintained since then and Adam Chamberlain kindly agreed to write a case study for the Somerset Otter Groups News!Otter.

### *A view from the other side. Adam Chamberlain*

Being a lover of all things nature, you would imagine I would be thrilled to find out I had an otter visiting me a couple of times a week. In fact, there are many people out there that would love to turn up for work and see this majestic creature up close and personal. I must admit, it was magical watching that head pop up, take a look at me and then dive back down. There's only one small problem. I'm the owner of a Fishing Lake.



In late December 2020 I turned up to do some work at the lake. while clearing some brush from the far corner of the lake, I stumbled across the skull of a large carp. Although strange, it wasn't completely unusual to imagine the fish had died naturally and been pulled out the waters edge by another animal and eaten. Days later though I made the grim discovery of another half-eaten carp on the side of the bank. It looked suspiciously like an otter kill. But I knew I needed evidence. Two Amazon trail cameras later and a very long 2 week wait later and I got my first image on the camera. It wasn't clear. In fact the animal that set off the camera was right on the edge of the edge of the camera. What gave it away for me was how it moved. I was 90% sure, but it wasn't confirmed.

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## Case Study continued: A view from the other side by A. Chamberlain



It took another couple of weeks, and some strategic camera moves, before I got the pictures I had been waiting for. There it was, clear as day. This incredible animal. I had worked out where he was coming in from and positioned the cameras right in his path. At first it was just a glimpse. But after a few weeks he was coming right up the camera. He was amazing. Yet every time he visited, he was killing a carp worth £500.

This was his territory. He had every right to be there. But he was destroying my business. A few people said to me oh its nature, and its only a few fish a week. But he was eating £1000 of fish a week. I contacted Somerset Otter Group and presented my evidence. There were a few options, but it seemed that the only real way would be to fence the fishery off. This, presented its own problems. It turns out otters are incredible powerful, something I would later capture on film. The wire I needed, and the machinery and materials would be around ten thousand pounds. This was a huge outlay for a one acre site. But it was something we had to do to keep the business going.



Otters have a bad rep amongst Anglers. Mainly because they only eat the good bits of the fish. They tend to take the large carp and what's left is a pretty gruesome find. I was honest with my members about the problem from day one. But I did my best to educate them. There are many in the angling community that believe that otters are out of control, destroying great sport. People have tunnel vision. Many years ago, when our rivers where full of fish and angling was good, the otter population thrived. I think that angling and otters can go side by side. It's a mindset. Its about education. I learnt lots about the otters from my cameras and from talking to Jo and Somerset Otter Group. There's too many misconceptions out there. For now, my business is safe. Although I haven't seen the otter at all this year, I hope he wanders past the cameras. Just so I can have another glimpse of such an magnificent animal.