

River Otter Beaver Trial: 2018-19 update



Devon
Wildlife Trust

River Otter Beavers grow to eight family groups

We are now approaching the end of the fourth year of the River Otter Beaver Trial, and the beavers are thriving. Numbers have grown from two family groups at the start of the Trial in 2015 to around eight families by the summer of 2018. This growth is similar to the projection we made at the start of the Trial, and fits in with how we might expect a native resident species to re-occupy its former range.

To find out more about the background to this pioneering project and to see how you can become part of it, please visit

[www.devonwildlifetrust.org/
what-we-do/our-projects](http://www.devonwildlifetrust.org/what-we-do/our-projects)

Mobile beavers

At present, the beaver population remains relatively small in relation to the size of the River Otter and its tributaries. It's also a mobile population, and we continue to observe significant movements of family groups and individuals throughout the river catchment.

This mobility was particularly apparent in the case of two high profile beaver families on sections of the River Otter with good public access. During the summers of 2014 and 2015, a yellow tagged female beaver (and her family) were frequently spotted near Ottery St Mary, and then in summers of 2016 and 2017, a pink tagged female provided consistently excellent views north of Otterton. In both cases, these families subsequently moved off into other stretches of the river with no public access. This made watching beavers a much less predictable activity with far fewer sightings during the summer of 2018.

As beaver numbers continue to increase, the animals will push into other parts of the river catchment. Their territories are also likely to become more stable. This may result in more chances for beaver watching and perhaps allow local businesses to develop opportunities around this activity.



This stunning picture of a River Otter beaver was taken near Otterton by local wildlife photographer, David White.

The future of beavers in Britain

The River Otter Beaver Trial concludes in 2020. It began in 2015 when the Devon Wildlife Trust (DWT) and partners were granted a licence by Natural England to re-release the beavers back onto the river. This was after government agencies had first caught the animals and then confirmed that they were healthy. The licence came with many conditions, including an exit strategy which requires DWT to remove the beavers from the river in the event that it is triggered by Natural England.

At the end of the Trial the decision about the future of the beavers on the River Otter will be made by the government, who are also expected to take the opportunity to decide on the wider status of beavers in England at the same time. Interestingly the Scottish Government have already decided that their beavers will be reclassified as a resident native species and allowed to remain on the River Tay and in Knapdale.

The majority of landowners and other stakeholders that have been involved with the River Otter Trial are quite open to the prospect of the beavers remaining after 2020, but on the condition that a clear management strategy is in place to avoid and mitigate some of the negative impacts that may occur, and that funding should be identified for its delivery.

The development of this management strategy and how it will work after 2020 is now a key focus of the Trial. Its aim is to put in place a framework for how beavers and people can co-exist in the future, should the beavers be allowed to remain on the River Otter.

Beaver dams

Large dams can appear much more permanent but can still be temporary structures, especially in bigger streams. This photograph was taken in October 2018, and depending on the conditions, it may not have survived the winter.

Beaver dams vary enormously. In many cases they are small temporary structures which gradually break down as water levels rise. In others, they are large stable structures that create big ponds, and can even cause streams to change course or divide.

Our monitoring shows that there were around 26 dams in place in the River Otter catchment in December 2018. Since 2015 we have recorded 81 dams, many of which have since been washed away. Some of these dams have been re-built by the beavers. In a few places dams have been removed by landowners and/or our River Otter Beaver Trial team. We believe that this active and pragmatic intervention is the best way to help local communities and beavers co-exist in the long term.

Small dams can form quickly, and then wash away as soon as river levels rise.



Scott West from the Westcountry Rivers Trust surveying the height of a dam to assess its impact on fish passage.

Do beaver dams prevent fish migrating?

One of the concerns expressed about beavers is that their dams might prevent the movement of migrating fish, in particular trout and salmon that move upstream to spawn in gravel-beds.

Using the expertise from the Westcountry Rivers Trust, the River Otter Beaver Trial is developing a method for assessing the passability of beaver dams for trout and salmon. By measuring key dimensions and adapting techniques that are used on man-made dams a model is being developed which will allow us to assess the fish passability of individual beaver dams. With this tool it would then be possible to make quick and accurate decisions about when intervention could most help the movement of fish.

Artificial structures like this concrete weir act as formidable barriers for migrating trout and salmon, preventing access to large parts of the river system.



Small trees next to watercourses can easily be felled by beavers. This apple tree has been protected from the attentions of local beavers using galvanised weld mesh (90cm high).



Interactions with beavers

If you are close to an adult beaver when it displays its 'tail-slap' warning it can be intimidating. Beavers are large animals, and the explosion of spray, and noise that results from this behaviour is designed to scare a predator, whilst also serving to warn other nearby beavers of a possible threat. If you happen to be in the water when this occurs, it can be disconcerting, particularly if accompanied by a 'mock-charge' which also serves to drive predators away. In 2018 we had one case reported of a night-time angler encountering this territorial behaviour on the River Otter.

This behaviour may be more common during the season when beaver kits are in and around the burrow (May – July). They do also appear to be more defensive towards otters and dogs during this period. If you do find yourself in the water with a beaver at this time of year, it is probably best to quietly move away. As with any wild animal, give them space to escape so that they don't feel cornered.

News of encounters with and sightings of beavers remain very important to the Trial, especially if you are able to spot a beaver with a coloured ear tag. Many of the River Otter beavers have been fitted with these in accordance with our licence conditions, and your sightings will be a key part in the research programmes we run on these fascinating animals.

To report sightings email

beavers@devonwildlifetrust.org

Signs like this one have been erected in areas along the River Otter in order to reduce the risks of disturbance to beavers and their potential conflict with people. In June 2017 a local dog was bitten quite badly by a beaver. We feel it is important that dog walkers and other river users are aware of beaver locations to help prevent these types of incident re-occurring.



Riverfly monitoring

The Riverfly Partnership is a dynamic network of organisations, representing anglers, conservationists, entomologists, scientists, watercourse managers and relevant authorities, working together.

The Riverfly Partnership is hosted by the Freshwater Biological Association. The River Otter Fisheries Association has begun training a team of volunteers to use Riverfly to monitor the health of watercourses within the catchment. It is a very simple method which uses a few indicator species to assess how healthy the stretch of river is, and how it is impacted by pollution. After a one-day training course volunteers are able to identify the larvae of mayflies, caddisflies (sedges) and a few other common insects. Lots of advice and support is given to volunteers to ensure they are confident and familiar with the process.

To get involved in this project on the River Otter, contact Olly Forster on Olly@deerpark.co.uk

Even if you don't live in the River Otter, you can get involved in Riverfly wherever you live.

If you are interested in helping on any other Devon rivers, you can contact richard.horrocks1@btinternet.com who will put you in touch with your local team. You can also find the local contact and much more information by visiting the national website www.riverflies.org

Importance of buffer strips to healthy rivers and beavers

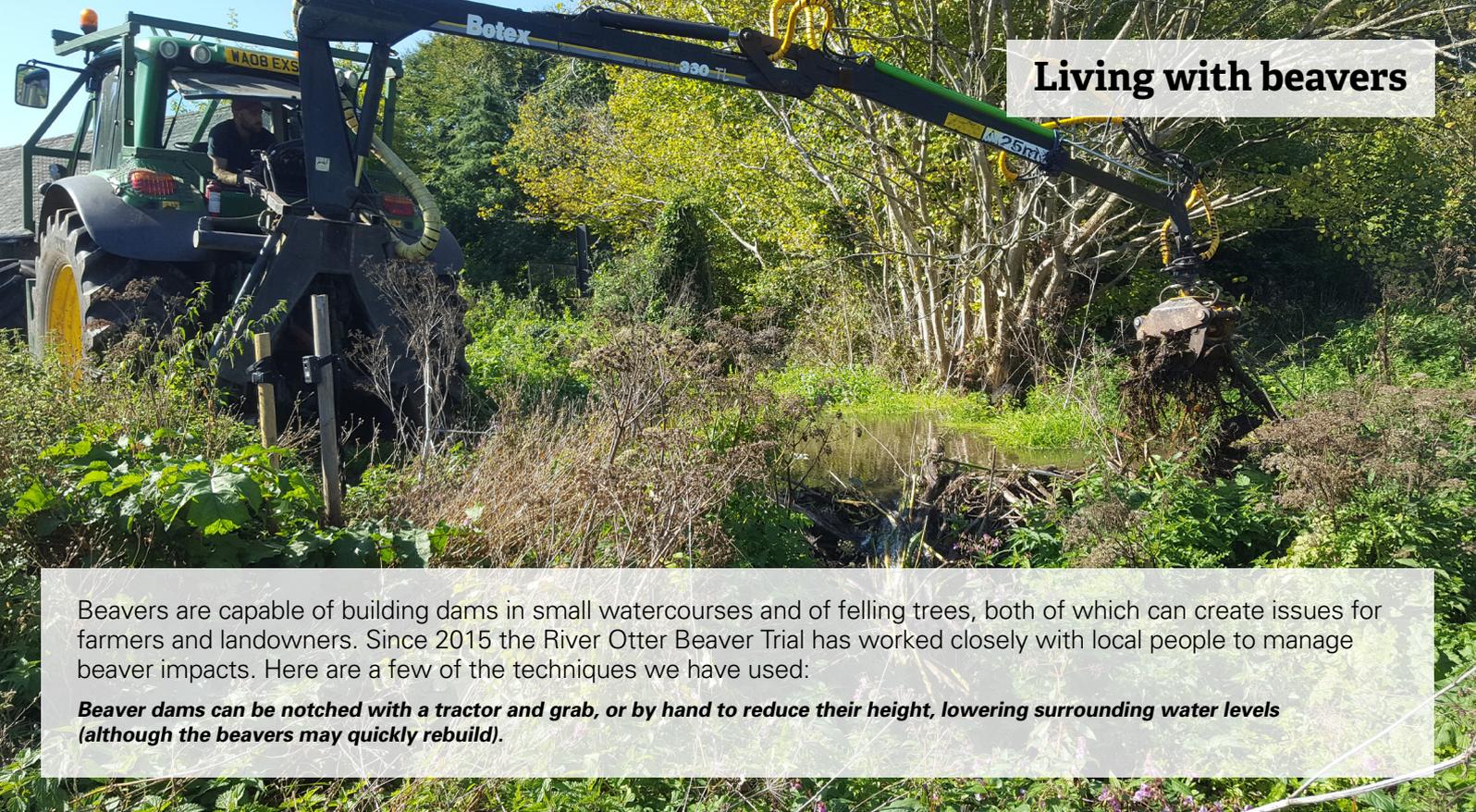
Diffuse pollution (the run-off of top soil and animal waste from surrounding land) is one of the most pressing challenges affecting the quality of our rivers and streams and their ability to support wildlife. Many wildlife watchers and anglers are concerned about the troubling declines in river insects such as mayflies that result from these water quality problems.

One of the best ways to combat diffuse pollution is to leave a buffer strip of 'natural' vegetation alongside each watercourse. The strips only need to be a few metres wide but they can be highly effective in reducing run-off, while they also provide vital corridors of habitat for beavers, and a whole host of other wildlife.

The River Otter Beaver Trial is stimulating a lot of conversation about how much space should be given to watercourses and nature, as well as the payments that society could provide to farmers for doing work to create them. If society provides payments to farmers for ecosystem services, such as the provision of clean water and biodiversity we could all be better off. The benefits that beavers may bring for water storage would also be maximised, and conflicts reduced.

The River Otter has a healthy population of trout, which are found throughout the catchment





Beavers are capable of building dams in small watercourses and of felling trees, both of which can create issues for farmers and landowners. Since 2015 the River Otter Beaver Trial has worked closely with local people to manage beaver impacts. Here are a few of the techniques we have used:

Beaver dams can be notched with a tractor and grab, or by hand to reduce their height, lowering surrounding water levels (although the beavers may quickly rebuild).

Bicton College

Rob Stoner, Dairy Manager, Bicton College

“Beavers have been active at Bicton Home farm (part of Bicton College) since the summer of 2016. Initially we had concerns whether we could farm alongside the beavers but decided to take no action and allow them to stay. We then discovered how incredible and versatile these animals are. They are master craftspeople capable of building a dam sturdy enough for us to walk over. They are also strong, being able to drag branches and small trees over some considerable distance.

We soon realised, too, that the beavers could be a great teaching resource for our students. We are currently managing to farm alongside the beavers but we are slowly seeing water levels rise and compromise our grazing platform in certain areas. We will be working closely with Devon Wildlife Trust and Natural England to address this issue and secure the relationship Bicton has with these amazing animals.”

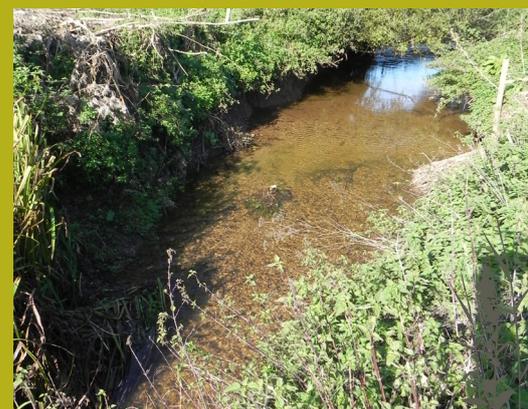
In some cases, where land drainage or localised flooding is a problem, complete removal of a beaver dam is the best management option.

Wessex Water – Otterhead Lakes

Ellie Phillips, Conservation, Access and Recreation Officer, Wessex Water

“In 2017, beavers was confirmed at Otterhead Lakes in Somerset, at the top of the River Otter catchment. As well as being an important water supply reservoir owned by Wessex Water, the lakes are a Local Nature Reserve managed by the Otterhead Estate Trust. Wessex Water recognised the potential environmental benefits of the beaver’s presence, but their potential impact on the water supply infrastructure was a concern.

With support and advice from the River Otter Beaver Trial, Wessex Water has taken simple steps to pre-empt and manage any potential issues, including managing the vegetation to discourage beavers from interfering with water supply infrastructure. We are already seeing new habitats being created upstream and are working with the University of Exeter, to monitor changes in water quality resulting from beaver activity. This is an exciting opportunity for us and we are looking forward to continued collaboration with the River Otter Beaver Trial.”





Research into socio-economics of beavers

Roger Auster

As part of the River Otter Beaver Trial's research into the impacts of beavers, Roger Auster began work as a PhD researcher at the University of Exeter in January 2018. His research will look into the impacts a beaver reintroduction in England would have upon people. Roger plans to focus upon public perceptions and potential socio-economic costs and benefits in areas including (but not limited to) agriculture, business, fishing and flood risk. If you would like to make contact with him to feedback any relevant experiences, please email him on rea213@exeter.ac.uk

Other organisations working on the River Otter

The River Otter Fisheries Association represents anglers, riparian and fishing right owners on the River Otter, working to protect and improve the river's environment, wild fish stocks and fishing. Find out more about their work at www.riverotterfisheriesassociation.org

The Otter Valley Association is a civic society founded to interest residents and visitors in the history, geography, natural history and architecture of the local area. They organise talks, guided walks and other events, and publish a quarterly newsletter. Anyone who is interested in the Otter Valley may join, wherever they live. Find out more at www.o.va.org.uk

Show your support for beavers

The River Otter Beaver Trial is England's only wild beaver project – but the beavers need your help. The Trial receives no government funding and relies on the local charity, Devon Wildlife Trust and its partners to meet the considerable costs of its scientific monitoring and community work. Please show your support for the beavers and this vital work.

Take the next step by visiting

www.devonwildlifetrust.org/support-devon-beavers

Thank you !



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The River Otter Beaver Trial is led by Devon Wildlife Trust working in partnership with University of Exeter, Clinton Devon Estates and the Derek Gow Consultancy. Expert independent advice is provided by the Royal Zoological Society for Scotland, Dr Roisin Campbell-Palmer, Professor John Gurnell, Professor Alastair Driver, and Gerhard Schwab, an international beaver expert based in Bavaria.

The Trial receives funding from the following organisations:



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