

River Otter Beaver Trial: 2016 update



Devon
Wildlife Trust

The River Otter beavers: one year on...

Welcome to the first annual summary of the work of the River Otter Beaver Trial (ROBT). We plan to produce summaries until the Trial's conclusion in 2020. To make sure you receive them and our regular quarterly electronic newsletter sign-up at our website www.devonwildlifetrust.org

The story so far...

After the first confirmation of a breeding population of wild beavers on the River Otter in 2013, five were captured by government officials in January 2015. These beavers underwent extensive health-checks by a team of specialist vets from Scotland. The checks showed the beavers to be entirely healthy.

On 23-24 March 2015, Devon Wildlife Trust (DWT) released the beavers back into the two stretches of the river where they had been captured. The release required a licence from Natural England, who imposed a wide range of conditions and a five-year programme of research and monitoring. As a result the **River Otter Beaver Trial (ROBT)** was established by a partnership of organisations, led by Devon Wildlife Trust, with the experience to carry out this work.

The history of beavers on the Otter

No one is sure where the beavers originated, but there is evidence that at least one was living around Fenny Bridges as far back as 2007. A male beaver was found dead in April 2012 in the same area, and he is assumed to be half of the original pair.

DNA analysis of the five beavers captured in 2015 suggests they are all very closely related, and inbreeding is a significant problem for the future health of the population. DWT was recently granted a licence to add a small number of additional animals to enhance the genetic diversity. This process began with the release of two adult beavers on the River Otter in May 2016.

Beaver walks and talks

Interest in the Devon Beavers has been overwhelming, and as well as 46 talks provided by the partners in the first year, a series of guided walks were very quickly booked up in 2015.

To find out about events programmed for 2016, join DWT or keep an eye on news at www.devonwildlifetrust.org

Our partners

The partnership is being led by Devon Wildlife Trust. Alongside us, researchers from the University of Exeter are providing expertise on the geography and ecology of the river. The University will lead much of the research, ensuring it is carried out in a rigorously objective way.

Clinton Devon Estates, which owns much of the land where the beavers had been living, are another crucial member of the partnership. Their role is to ensure that the management of the beavers is balanced with the needs of local farmers and landowners.

The fourth member of the partnership is the Derek Gow Consultancy. Derek and his team have extensive expertise in the handling and moving of beavers. His consultancy is also able to provide additional beavers for the trial.

One condition of the trial is a clear Exit Strategy which requires the partners to remove the beavers from the river if certain 'triggers' are reached. These include the impacts on local landowners and communities being deemed unacceptable, or the trial running out of money. This can happen at any time during the trial or at its conclusion in 2020 if Natural England judges it necessary.



In May 2016 two further beavers were released on to the River Otter.

Photo: Nick Upton/naturepl.com

Where are the beavers living now?

There are estimated to be 13 beavers now living on the river. They appear to be in three family groups between Honiton and the river's estuary at Budleigh Salterton. They are mostly nocturnal, so are difficult to see.

Researchers on the trial are mostly using field signs to detect where they are living. The most obvious of these signs is beaver-cut willow, which can be seen along much of the river.

Sitting quietly along one of the riverside footpaths at dusk, provides your best chance of seeing beavers and other wildlife including otters. Young beavers appear from July onwards.

Please report any beavers that you do see by emailing the details to beavers@devonwildlifetrust.org

Your sightings are very important to the project.

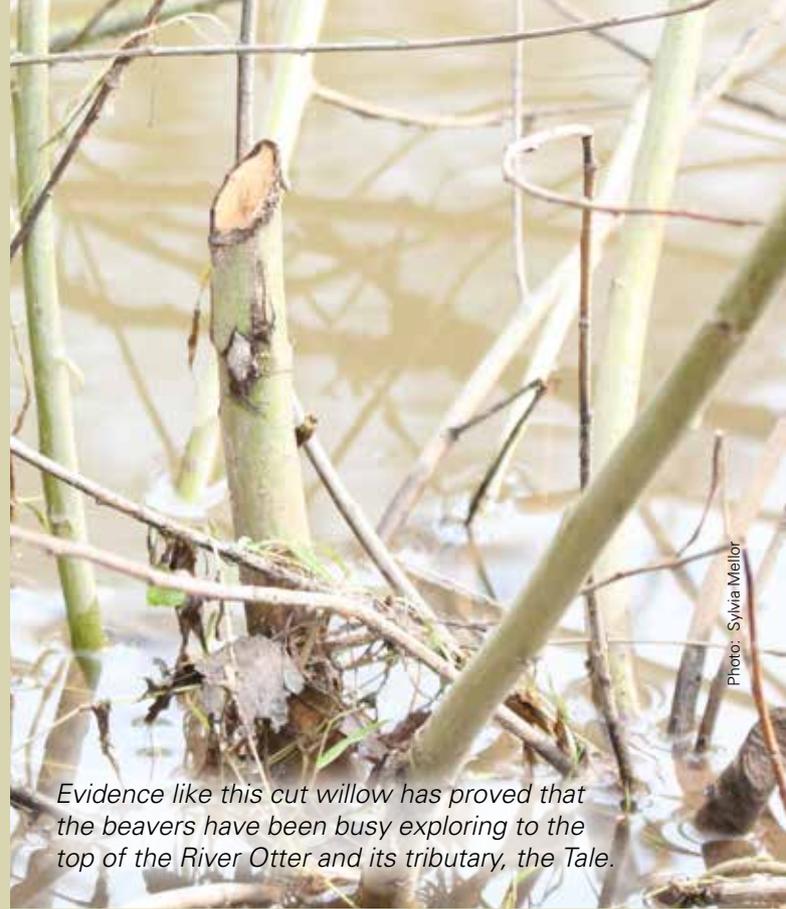


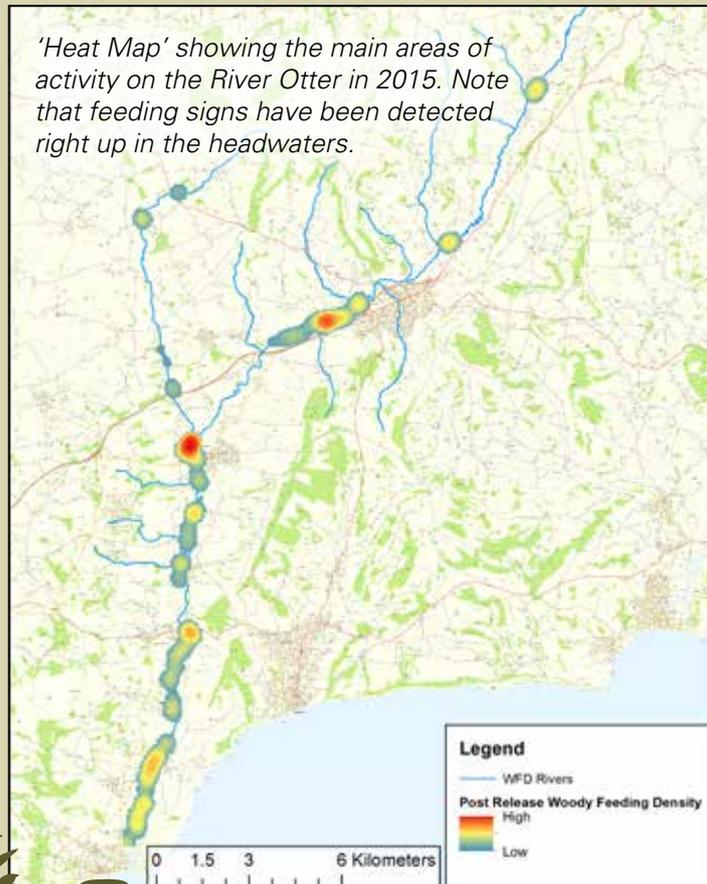
Photo: Sylvia Mellor

Evidence like this cut willow has proved that the beavers have been busy exploring to the top of the River Otter and its tributary, the Tale.

What impact are beavers having on local trees?

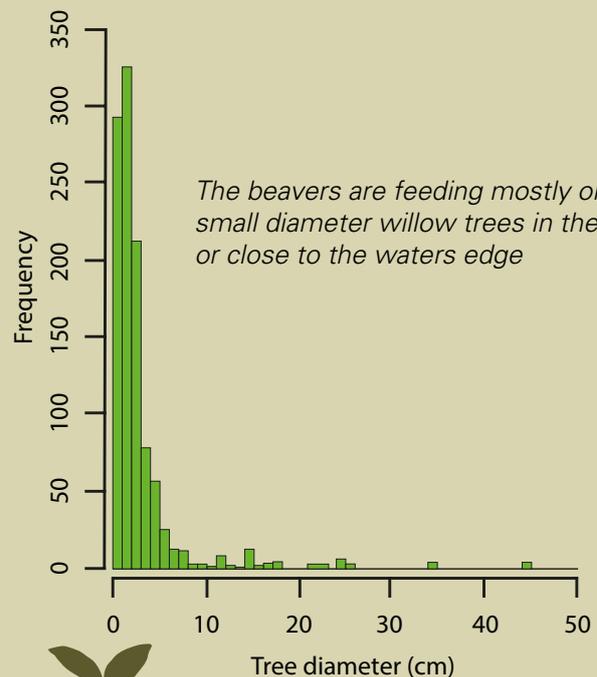
The first systematic survey of the River Otter carried out between December 2015 and March 2016 is already showing some interesting facts about the beavers and their impacts on local trees.

More than 86% of the woody feeding signs mapped were willow trees, with alder and hazel accounting for about 3% each. Eleven other tree species accounted for the other 11%.



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The vast majority of cut 'trees' had very small diameter stems and branches – with the vast majority being less than 3cms in diameter (see graph).





The Trial is using a Trimble Geo7X GP device to map beaver activity. This kit was supplied by Korec.



Watch a short video showing community support for the River Otter beavers.

Go to: www.vimeo.com/133285004

If you do go beaver watching please observe the following:

- Keep to footpaths, do not enter private land
- Keep dogs under close control and out of the water
- Respect anglers and keep your distance so you do not disturb them

It's possible to see Escot Park's captive beavers. Call Mish Kennaway on 01404 819155 or email mish@escot-devon.co.uk

The River Otter beavers are living in burrows that they dig in the river's banks.

Beaver Facts

Beavers only build dams in ditches and small streams in order to create deep water for safety. We don't expect to see dams in the main river where the beavers are currently living.

Beavers are entirely herbivorous. They graze riverside plants like yellow flag iris and Himalayan balsam in summer, and willow in winter.

National Mammal conference in Exeter

In October 2015 DWT jointly hosted the National Mammal Symposium in Exeter with the Mammal Society and Devon Mammal Group.

The Symposium was well attended with mammal experts from around the country, with day two focused on the Devon beavers. Some of the profits from this event were kindly donated to the beaver appeal.



The photographer Nick Upton kindly supplied many of the great images of the beavers that we use for the project. DWT is also one of the chosen charities of the Nature Picture Library who have donated a proportion of their profits to the Devon Beaver Appeal.

Staying in touch

The best way to keep updated with the trial and to keep up to date with events is to become a regular supporter of Devon Wildlife Trust. The trial is dependent on the generous donations of its supporters, and is running a beaver appeal that needs your help!

To become a DWT supporter or donate to the appeal visit: www.devonwildlifetrust.org

You can also register to receive regular updates on all of DWT beaver related work by asking to be put on the DWT beaver mailing list by emailing: beavers@devonwildlifetrust.org



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



The Peter De Haan Charitable Trust

Funding for the ROBT comes from Devon Wildlife Trust (DWT), the Royal Society for Wildlife Trusts (RSWT), Peter de Haan Charitable Trust, the University of Exeter and from the generous donations from the public made to the Devon Beaver Appeal.

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