

TALE VALLEY TRUST NEWSLETTER

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Tale Valley Trust

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BEAVERS ON THE RIVER OTTER

For a while there have been European beavers living wild in the Otter Valley and visiting the Tale Valley. Nearly 2 decades of TVT conservation work has prepared the way to welcome back this keystone species, and we look forward to their help in coppicing overgrowth and managing riverbank habitat. The Tale Valley Trust endorses the beaver project and is pleased to include the following from Devon Wildlife Trust -

It's now been a little over a year since Devon Wildlife Trust and the River Otter Beaver Trial partners released beavers back into the river Otter.

Five adult beavers were trapped in 2015 by the Animal and Plant Health Agency (Defra) and subsequently tested by a veterinary team from the Royal Zoological Society of Scotland. Before release we needed to ensure they were free from any disease which may pose a threat to people, livestock and wildlife. They all passed with flying colours!

Their first season on the river saw one female give birth to three kits. This year a different female has given birth to five kits! This is thought to be the maximum number possible; the river Otter certainly suits the beavers very well. There are currently two breeding pairs and their family offspring including a number of unpaired adults.



Adult beavers with a willow branch

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Whilst the beavers were held in captivity DNA testing was also carried out. Its first purpose was to confirm that these were indeed Eurasian beavers. We also wanted to explore the family connections and their interrelatedness. The evidence pointed strongly to the river Otter beavers being very closely related. If these animals are to be a founding population, which will be determined at the end of the five year trial, we needed to increase the genetic diversity as soon as possible. Simple in theory, but practice is much more challenging!

Firstly a licence needed to be secured from Natural England and with it all the supporting evidence and methods we would employ. We then needed to find a site where the beavers could be safely released, where neighbouring landowner support had been secured – just dropping them off in the river wasn't an option! Our first choice was so suitable that an existing pair in the river soon took up residence. As beavers are highly territorial we quickly needed a plan B. After much searching the perfect site was found – a series of ponds close to the river. Artificial lodges were constructed including bedding from their previous lodge to allow for a 'soft release' - along with infra-red CCTV to enable us to keep watch! Then we needed to secure a healthy UK bred pair of beavers which were unrelated. One beaver was sourced from our 3 hectare fenced trial area in north Devon and another from a private zoological collection. The release occurred in May 2016 and early signs are very encouraging. The beavers have stayed together on site and are slowly engineering their local environment and making forays into the river. This is being closely studied by the University of Exeter who are exploring the effects beavers have on water levels and also water quality.

The beavers on the river are generating huge interest with people travelling from far afield to catch a glimpse. If you are tempted to see them on the river please stay on public footpaths and keep any dogs under close control. Please send any records with notes of any distinguishing features (7 beavers have coloured ear tags) to beavers@devonwildlifetrust.org

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

To become a DWT supporter or donate to our beaver appeal visit www.devonwildlifetrust.org



Beaver watch group at dusk, Escot Park

HIMALAYAN BALSAM ON THE TALE

2016 is the 11th year of balsam clearance on the Tale. All our volunteers past and present should be proud of their achievements. Through their efforts the river corridor no longer has an infestation of this invasive plant. Inevitably vigilance must be maintained and complacency is not an option, but with six or more volunteers, seven miles of the main river from Danes Mill to the confluence at Ottery is comfortably achievable in under seven hours.

Our second day, at the end of July was dry and sunny. Volunteers included riparian owners, valley residents, and even a lady from Leeds – a press-ganged house guest?! We split into two pairs and a trio, some working upstream and others downstream. Apart from one hidden stand of plants discovered in the corner of a paddock, out of the main river, we probably pulled less than 200 plants between us over the whole seven miles. Remarkable!



Explosive seed pods can disperse up to 800 seeds per plant

The privilege and pleasure of journeying the river in this way is immense. There are very few riverside public footpaths in the Tale Valley. The river was teeming with fish and insect life, with several sightings of kingfishers, dippers, mallard and grey heron. The banks and field margins were alive with an assortment of small birds, and overhead buzzards were wheeling on the thermals. When you focus on finding balsam, finding signs of otters or water voles is not automatic as you can quickly start missing the plants. However a survey in late Spring by Mervyn Newman confirmed healthy populations of both. We did in addition spot evidence of beaver.



Beyond the Tale – balsam on the river Otter



At one point a roe buck took umbrage at invasion of his territory and had a good bark at the wader clad intruder – much to her delight. (Not too many deer in the middle of Leeds!) The river has a number of rough pastures and wetlands along its length, which in July sunshine are a sight to behold. The rich variety of plant life hosts an equally rich variety of insect life – in casual observation we saw red admiral, peacock, meadow brown, cabbage white, comma and painted lady butterflies.

It is not often that a necessary task is so rewarding but it certainly helps when cajoling new volunteers. Long may the enthusiasm for the river and its valley continue.

It should not be forgotten that it is through the support of the farming community, and their awareness of the importance of good water quality and habitat to the biodiversity of the valley, as well as allowing volunteer access through their land, that has enabled these projects to flourish.

And from a volunteer's perspective -
I've been volunteering for a few years now with

the Tale Valley Trust, pulling Himalayan balsam from the River Tale in the summer months. We walk the River, wearing waders that are supplied. It is really noticeable how little Balsam there is in the River itself. Unfortunately, we have found a few horrendous patches just back from the River. I can appreciate that we shall always need to pull Balsam from the River, even though we see so little, as it would readily re-gain ground. Seven miles of the river is searched in one day now, monthly from June to September.

This year, I have also volunteered a couple of times with the Otter Valley Association. There is a big difference in detail, though not in approach. Himalayan balsam is so prolific in the River Otter that there are not sufficient numbers of volunteers to clear it all in the summer- so they are concentrating on the tributaries and ditches. Here we are not up to our knees in water - only ankle deep, so wellies will do. There is so much Balsam that I found that on the first day, fellow volunteers preferred to ignore or not search for the seedlings, concentrating instead on the fully grown plants to pull. My view is that every plant needs to be pulled to prevent future problems. On my second day, a concerted effort was made on boggy land. To look at the field initially was disheartening, but by the time I left, real inroads were being made. I do wonder at the big heaps left behind – they are all on wet ground, and it is likely that there will be growth of Balsam from these areas.

The aim, I think, is to have groups of volunteers dedicated to certain areas, but so far there are not enough of us. A point of annoyance was that a landowner had requested the Balsam to be cleared by the OVA, but with no input. I feel that landowners who do benefit when their land is clear of Balsam should contribute either by helping out and/or with provision towards equipment. With the OVA volunteers are all retired, whereas the TVT actively encourages all ages.

- Mo

MESSING ABOUT ON THE RIVER

Organising any outdoor event in our great British summer is always a gamble. 2014 was fine, picnicking weather, - 2015 was actually rained off and had to be cancelled. For 2016 the day started overcast but warm & still. Sadly by noon the wind had got up & chilling rain began dampening proceedings. The idea of the day is to get wet, and even muddy – but only if you can sit on the grass and dry off whilst enjoying the barbecue and an ice cream.

What is reliable is the wonderful support the event receives from like-minded organisations – notably the West Country Rivers Trust, (www.wrt.org.uk) Devon Wildlife Trust, (www.devonwildlifetrust.org), Devon Mammal Group, (www.devonmammalgroup.org), and this year special thanks go to the Escot Wildwood Trust (www.escot.wildwoodtrust.org) who sponsored most of the overheads of the event.

Nearly 120 people ventured down to the river. Activities included beaver dam building, gold panning, model raft building & sailing, and of course kick sampling for critters -

Annabel from WRT wrote: Over the course of the day, several families spent time in the river kick-sampling and discovering the breadth of the aquatic life, even in a relatively short stretch. After a few minutes of sampling and sweeping with the nets, the haul was brought back to the trays so that we could all have a proper look. Fish species included: bullhead, minnow, stickleback, stone loach, and a couple of eels. Lots of different invertebrates were caught: Mayfly nymphs, caddisfly and midge larva, a leech, snails, freshwater shrimp, and two rather large and menacing dragonfly larvae (probably Broad-bodied Chasers).

The enthusiasm and interest shown by the children was particularly rewarding. (One particularly enthusiastic 4-year-old refused to get out of the river, despite the near onset of hypothermia!). At WRT we feel very strongly that encouraging young people to find out about their local river and its occupants will encourage a passion for protecting that river, even potentially sparking a life-long interest. The choices that we all make every day can have an effect on the health of local watercourses, so the more we understand those impacts, the better the chance that we will make sympathetic choices. Events such as Messing About on the River offer a lot of fun for local families, and the opportunity to better understand the weird and wonderful aquatic world. Catch you in 2017!



'Beaver dam' building on the Tale

THE RIVER TALE WATER QUALITY MONITORING PROJECT



The river Tale plays an important role for everyone who lives in and around the Tale Valley. Through time the river has carved into the landscape to create the stunning valley we see today and remains a great source of pride for the valley's communities and a critical resource for its wildlife.

However, the Tale is not without its problems...

Over many years of water quality sampling, the Environment Agency has flagged up unusually high levels of pollutants (e.g. nitrates and phosphates) in the Tale.

In light of this, the Westcountry Rivers Trust teamed up with the Tale Valley Trust to improve understanding of water quality in the catchment.

As part of the Water Quality Monitoring Project, we monitored 15 sampling points throughout the Tale and its tributaries. The Environment Agency monitoring point is found just upstream of the river Tale's confluence with the main river Otter but, with multiple samples dividing the Tale into more manageable areas, this helped us to answer the question:

'Is water quality an issue throughout the river Tale and its tributaries, or are certain areas contributing more to high pollution levels than others?'

From this, we can start to identify key pollution source areas within the Tale catchment, where further work can be targeted. Where should we carry out future

