

A 2018 Eurasian beaver (*Castor fiber*) survey in Kent

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(Foreword by Jon Bramley)

*It is debatable when in the UK the Eurasian beaver (*Castor fiber*) became extinct but it is a relatively easy mammal to find when surveyed for and no doubt was hunted out for meat, fur and of course castoreum by our ancestors, who had a very different and more physically demanding life; where popping into a supermarket overflowing with food and other choices was not an option.*

In the late 1990's and early years of the millennium I had the privilege to meet and work with Graham Roberts, Chris Matcham and Rob Strachan in various mammal and wetland projects in the SE and we became part of the Otters and Rivers Officer network that spread around many areas of the UK.

I did then, and still do today in Kent, chase up reports of otters and other wetland mammals in the SE. During that millennium time I was approached by two people who reported signs of a 'large mammal' in a catchment found in the border lands of two counties in the SE. A site visit certainly did find the signs of a large free-living mammal.

This report may well have been the first record of a free-living beaver in the SE of England for over 500 years. Local landowners and the local public had mixed views on the presence of beavers in that catchment and access to a core habitat was not achievable. The matter was complicated by the actual identification of the beaver species and the number(s) of beavers in that catchment was not known (though probably very small) and this population appears to have subsequently died out.

Around this same time Kent Wildlife Trust introduced Eurasian beaver into a large enclosed area in East Kent to help manage one of the last fenland sites in Kent, where other management techniques were proving to be difficult and expensive.

In recent years there have been occasional reporting's of beaver elsewhere in Kent and one animal turned up in the sea in Ramsgate harbour in 2014. But I am not certain 'Fucus vesiculosus' was to the animal's taste and that individual was collected by a wildlife charity.

In 2016 Bramley Associates moved to Canterbury and in the first summer here while we were on a pleasure trip beaver signs were evident in several places in the Greater Stour catchment. In 2018 Bramley Associates, friends and assorted ecologists were 'encouraged' into looking for beavers (though this was rather easy as everyone wanted to look) and with kind financial help from the Kent & Medway Biological Records Centre (KMBRC) we undertook a survey of the Greater Stour valley from Ashford in Kent to very near the sea at Sandwich Bay.

The Bramley Associates consultancy in 2018 set aside several days to look for beaver activity. We are very grateful to the Kent & Medway Biological Records Centre (KMBRC) who kindly supported this survey and to all those surveyors who came out with us to look. Thanks to all.

The survey started in January 2018 and continued until June 2018. Positive in situ signs of beaver were found at some 30 sites (16 tetrads) and the distribution of this species currently extends at least from Canterbury City Centre to near the coast at Deal within the Stour catchment (Figure 1).

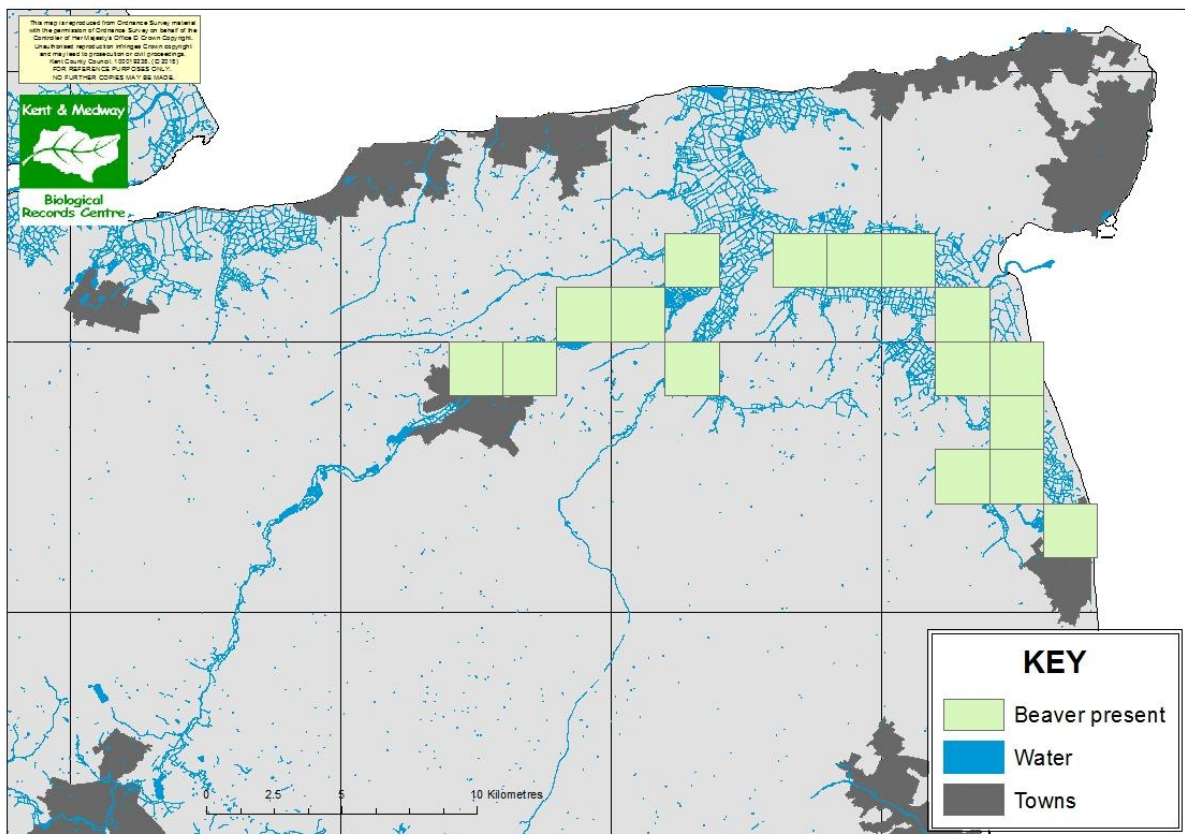


Figure 1. Showing tetrad map of recorded beaver signs in the 2018 survey

Overall the distribution found in 2018 probably means that Kent has the second most widely dispersed beaver population currently in England, with a population that has rather recently appeared in Devon running (swimming) currently for the title.

It is unclear where these animals in Kent have originated from but the signs we found at a number of places showed that some sites had been occupied by beavers for many years. Interestingly otters, which probably went extinct on the Stour catchment towards the end of the last millennium, have also re-appeared in the last few years in that catchment.

Classical tree felled feeding signs are widespread in the Stour catchment (Figure 2) but we also came across other signs, such as dams, lodges/resting areas, paths and feeding piles of woody and herbaceous plants. Breeding of beavers was also reported and a number of photographs of beavers was shown to us.



Figure 2. *Showing typical beaver feeding signs recorded in the River Stour catchment*

Interestingly otters, which probably went extinct on this catchment in the last millennium, have also re-appeared in the last few years at a number of sites in east Kent from Ashford to near the sea at Sandwich and we were also shown photographs of that species (sometimes very close to known beaver sites). The future interaction between these species will be interesting to investigate and I am sure that an under-graduate or post-graduate research project would be an excellent way forward and we have spoken to two local universities about pursuing this.

Since 2001 there have been several official and several guerrilla releases of beaver in the UK and while unofficial otter releases did occur into the 1990's in England it could well be that some 'supportive' releases of beaver and again also otter is now occurring. There are obvious positive and negative aspects to this activity and this was clearly set out by Roisin Campbell-Palmer in the Mammal Society's 2016 Spring News.

It will be interesting in having beavers back in the UK after 100's of years without them and there is no doubt they have now come back to colonise a city area that this species would have known previously and very likely in the 5th and 6th Century when the name Canterbury can be traced back to the Old English name *Cantwareburhrs*.

If you do come across signs when out and about in Kent please do let KMBRC know. Looking at the very recent distribution of that species, beavers could well appear in other catchments in Kent and indeed in other places in the UK.