

## Identification of the Field Signs of British Riparian Mammals

### Target species and sign

The target species include all wild riparian mammals especially with the emphasis on candidates being able to separate rare species, otters, polecat, and water vole in particular, all of which are biodiversity action plan (BAP) priority species. Depending on the region the recently introduced beaver would also become part of this target species list. There would also be emphasis placed on identification of mink sign as mink pose a major threat to water vole recovery.

### Confusing sign

Candidates will also be expected to be able to identify sign which is left by animals other than those outlined above and could be confused leading to misidentification. These include sign of cats, dogs, foxes and badgers commonly confused with otters, rats, hedgehogs and smaller rodents such as yellow necked mice and field voles commonly confused with water vole sign. Polecat sign should be separated from cats and other mustelids particularly mink, one of the target species. Scat and feeding sign for all of the mentioned mammals is also included, as is feeding sign and other signs commonly found in the riparian habitat including lagomorph scrapes and dust baths. Skulls and bones will also become part of the expected knowledge and may be brought in from other locations to insure a wide range of assessment criteria. If present in the region then pine marten sign will also be included

### Target group

The perceived target group is primarily ecologists and citizen-scientists who require reliable and measurable field-skills when making survey-based decisions that influence land management and conservation.

It is hoped this may also be of interest to naturalists in general and anyone else with an interest in wildlife.

### Rational

Making accurate decisions on land and wildlife management should only be based on sound data gathering. This evaluation can be used to train and assess those responsible for gathering such data to better insure its accuracy.

### Evaluation and training

The evaluation covers 30-35 questions over one day and will be scored using exactly the same complexity level criteria as the standard and specialist CyberTracker evaluations. The candidate is awarded one point for the correct interpretation of easy sign, or three marks against for a mistake. Examples of this may include recognition of a clear large dog track or badger latrine which would be difficult to confuse with anything else. Two points are awarded for the correct interpretation of a complex sign, or two marks against for a mistake. Examples of this may be the track of a small otter versus a cat or partial badger track. Three points are awarded for the correct interpretation of very complex sign, or one point against for a mistake. Examples of this may be, in this context water vole tracks versus rat tracks or questions that require an interpretation/evaluation of behaviour. The participant's final score is a percentage calculated by dividing the total number of correct points by the sum of the correct and incorrect points.

The process is open to all. No formal training is needed although a prior training course is offered in the form of a two day workshop. This would be beneficial for complete beginners to cover the majority of sign that would be potentially tested. In this instance there will be a consolidation period of at least two weeks before training and assessment to insure the evaluation is not based upon memory.

### Venue

Venues would need to be carefully selected to give as much possibility of encountering the maximum number of signs possible from a wide range of species, although inevitably this may not always be possible.

### Parameters

Below is a table giving examples of the types of sign likely to be found and the species making it. *This is not an exhaustive list and is meant as a guide only.*

Type of sign	Possible cause,
Damage to trees and bark	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Various species rodent feeding especially voles and mice</li> <li>• Squirrel sign striping/nesting</li> <li>• Lagomorph damage at the base of trees</li> <li>• Woodpecker sign</li> <li>• Mechanical/human damage</li> <li>• Badger claw marks</li> <li>• Water vole feeding on tree barks</li> </ul>
Damage to the ground	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rabbit scrapes and dust baths</li> <li>• Otters rolling</li> <li>• Otter making spraint mounds</li> <li>• Badger digs</li> <li>• Dog scrapes</li> <li>• Cat latrines</li> </ul>
Tracks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Otter</li> <li>• Badger</li> <li>• Pine marten</li> <li>• Polecat</li> <li>• Mink</li> <li>• Smaller mustelids, stoat and weasel</li> <li>• Dog</li> <li>• Cat</li> <li>• Fox</li> <li>• Water vole</li> <li>• Field vole</li> <li>• Wood mouse</li> <li>• YN Mouse</li> <li>• Rat</li> <li>• Hedgehog</li> </ul>
Scat	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All of the above mammals</li> <li>• Latrine sites</li> <li>• Scent marking</li> </ul>
Feeding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Classic vole feeding on vegetation</li> <li>• Kills from the above mention mammals</li> <li>• Rodent feeding in general</li> </ul>
Hair	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Where relevant</li> </ul>
Skulls, bones	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognition of mustelid skulls especially target species</li> <li>• Separation of the target species skulls and bones with commonly found skulls and bones of rodent, dogs and cats.</li> <li>• Basic recognition of skull group e.g. rodent, insectivore, ungulate carnivore etc.</li> </ul>
Homes, resting places and runs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Holes and tunnels</li> <li>• Runs</li> <li>• Couches</li> <li>• Holts</li> </ul>