

An adult otter resting.



In Search of Somerset's Otters.

Written by James Williams, in 2010.

Somerset is a well-watered county, with a wide variety of waterways. In the West there are the brawling cascades of the Barle and the Exe, then the tumbling trout reaches of the Tone. The sleepy, reed-choked isle seems so content in its flowery pastures it is in no hurry to reach the sea; the Parrett with its mills is more purposeful; the Brue disperses its energy into bird-rich reed beds and extensive wetlands. Beyond the waterless desert of Mendip lie the headwaters of the Frome, combining to become the mighty Bristol Avon. And all this wonderful variety of rivers and streams now supports a viable population of otters again.

Otters suffered an enormous decline in Britain in the '60s and '70s. By 1984, they had vanished almost to the point of extinction, not just in the industrial areas, but in rural areas too. Nobody had intended them harm, but their environment had become poisonous to the extent of being fatal. As they are exclusively water dependent, the implication for all of us is horrifying. Water, our main component, the very staff of life, had become destructive of life when its effects were concentrated in the body of the top predator of the water based food chain.

The otters throughout Somerset were affected. The River Tone lost its otters completely for more than ten years, and for a long period held the world record for pesticide contamination of a dead carnivore. Things were nearly as bad on the levels; in 1981 a coordinated search of 99 known sites found evidence at only two, adjacent, bridges. Again in 1982, and in 1985, the surveyors located only two otters.

Then the poisons were banned, and things started to improve. Otters spread back into Somerset from the west, and gradually filled the rivers to the east. For a long while the Brue valley was the frontier between the rivers of plenty, such as the Exe and Tone, and the areas where otters were still struggling to establish themselves, Wiltshire and beyond. But the results of the Environment Agencies recent fifth national survey show that they have now managed to become more secure and to expand across most of England again.



A river in spate can be dangerous for cubs.

Cubs stay in holt for 8 or 9 weeks before emerging.



The Somerset Otter Group, part of the Somerset Wildlife Trust, has been better placed than most to monitor this process and to try to find out more about this mysterious nocturnal animal, they have been carrying out detailed surveys and studies for some 20 years. Every spring all our members undertake a coordinated survey of the whole county. On the chosen Saturday they search their stretch of the river for signs of otter, such as spraints (droppings), or padding (footprints). Then on the Sunday they do it all again. Any new evidence is mapped, and a snapshot of the whereabouts of these nomadic animals on that one night all across the county is obtained.

For this year's survey 136 teams looked for signs of otters at 584 places, on two consecutive days, as usual. The results were very encouraging: only eight teams failed to find any evidence, which indicates that Somerset now has a widespread otter population, despite the continuing prevalence of the new parasitic bile fluke. A total of 73% of the sites held otter evidence and 16% showed that an otter had been there on the Saturday night. Interpretation of all this information suggested that we located 66 territories.

At a time of increasing agitation against otters by a small but vociferous section of the coarse fishing community, it is very valuable to have some indication of the actual numbers of these predators, to keep things in proportion. And it is good for people to realise just how few individual animals constitute Somerset's 'strong' population. Otters are scarce animals and therefore always vulnerable. The continuing threat to their well being posed by the newly imported fluke, first discovered in otters submitted by us for post mortem in 2004, is a real anxiety; it is too early to know how damaging it may be to them.



Otter Fact File

- Britain's largest predatory land animal, weighing approximately a fox-and-a-half to two foxes.
- If it's not a metre long it's not an otter. Sometimes confused with mink, but they are shorter than an otter's tail, no bigger than a ferret.
- Being large, they require a big territory; as they live on rivers, a big territory means a long territory. Our otters have been shown, by DNA studies from their spraints, to require about 12 miles for a dog otter and 7 for a bitch. They are basically solitary, and to defend the territory they patrol back and forth, marking it defensively (aggressively?) with spraints. They back this up by nasty fights, if necessary. This means that the population is always sparse. As a result they can only prune the fish population, not damage it; their predation is sustainable, unless they find a goldfish pond or a fish farm.
- Electric fencing is the best defence against unwelcome otter visits. Being wet, they dislike the sting, but it does not harm them.
- There is no fixed breeding season, but many cubs in Somerset seem to be born in late autumn. They are slow breeders, having two or three cubs, which they look after for a full year or more, so a bitch may not breed every year.
- Dead otters are a very valuable source of information about the species and the health of the environment. Somerset Otter Group sends them to a university for ongoing research.