

Otters in Somerset



SOMERSET

A factual guide for
anglers and pond owners



Protecting **Wildlife** for the Future

THE OTTER POPULATION OF SOMERSET

RECENT HISTORY

In Somerset, the otter population is still recovering from the nearly total wipe-out in the 1970s. Survey results suggest that at their lowest point in the early 80s, Somerset held fewer than 10 animals.

This disaster was caused by pesticides which have since been withdrawn. Gradually otter numbers increased, starting in the west of the county, and spreading east. Other creatures affected, such as birds of prey, also began to return. The otter recovery has been natural; there have been no releases.

THE PRESENT SITUATION

There have been four national surveys of otters in England. In the first survey in 1978 the percentage of positive sites for the whole country was only 6%.

Devon & Cornwall were the strongest region at 23%, and Somerset & Dorset scored only 1%.

In the latest survey, in 2002, Devon & Cornwall had recovered to 83%, and our area scored 40%. The individual scores for each separate river catchment show a steep decline as one moves east across Somerset:

N.Devon streams 100%, Taw 89%, Exe 90%, R. Otter 79%, West Somerset streams 89%, Parrett & Tone 55%, Axe 47%, N Somerset 33%, Brue 29%, Bristol Avon 7%, Frome & Piddle 11%, Hants Avon 18%.

In Somerset, an annual survey of the whole county is attempted, using a slightly different method. In 2004 the score was 72%, in 2005, 69%. Transferring the 2005 result to a map indicated the home territories of 39 adult otters. By extending this at the same sort of density to fill in the gaps in the survey we calculated a maximum potential "full house" score for the whole county. There is space for no more than 60 or 65 adult animals. Although admittedly only an inaccurate estimate, this figure serves to give a valid idea of the scarcity of otters in the habitats of Somerset.

THREATS TO THE OTTER

They are susceptible to several diseases, such as distemper, leptospirosis, kidney stones and tapeworms, any of which can reduce their ability to

hunt effectively. On the Somerset Levels there is a newly introduced parasite, a fluke previously unknown to Britain, which infects their gall-bladders. This is too recent a discovery to say how it will affect the already limited population of the Brue.

Storm swollen rivers cause them problems, especially the cubs, which are sometimes drowned in the nest, or if larger, washed away from their mother. Although the rivers are much cleaner than they were, post-mortems reveal that otters still carry a heavy burden of lead, PCBs, flame-retardants, gender-bender chemicals, etc... A surprising number of otters are killed by cars. Spates force otters onto the roads, especially at narrow bridges and culverts, and many are run over in wet weather. In 2002, 32 dead otters were recorded for Somerset, in 2003, 28, in 2004, 29; a significant proportion of these were sub-adults. In addition there must have been many others not found in the undergrowth and in their holts.



OTTERS AND FISHERIES

Otters pose little threat to river fish stocks. The length of their territories means that their effect is spread very thinly at any one place. Their favourite food is eels, and they eat a lot of small fish such as minnows, bullheads and sticklebacks. Larger fish are harder for them to catch, especially when the water is warm in summer and the fish are more active.

On ponds and lakes otters can be a nuisance, especially in winter when the rivers are swollen and difficult, and the pond water is cold, which reduces the mobility of the fish.

This is when otters kill the larger carp, which are torpid in the mud of the lake bottom.

However, in 2004 a Cefas-based analysis of otter spraints showed that carp were 11th in a list of 18 types of otter food, only 1.4% of the total. Out of 710 items identified, only 10 were carp. Eels and sticklebacks made up over half the diet, with perch, roach, sunbleak and gudgeon all featuring much more than carp or bream.

In a balanced, natural situation, with a wide range of species, age groups and sizes for the otter to choose from, the impact will be negligible, as it always goes for the easier prey. The larger or deeper the lake, the more likely the otter is to concentrate on smaller, margin-dwelling fish.

However in specialist lakes, fish farms, or garden ponds there is a limited selection, the larger fish are more readily available, and expensive losses can result. Such concentrations of their normally dispersed food can attract a bitch with cubs, to teach them how to catch their prey. It is legal to deny otters access by fencing, and the results of research into the best designs were published by the Specialist Anglers' Alliance in spring 2005. (www.sauk.org) There is a cost benefit in installing such a fence at a new pond as part of the setting-up, especially if large, specimen fish are to be stocked. If fencing after the problem has started, consideration must be given to the legal need to take care of the otter's protected status. Trapping is both illegal and pointless, as the vacant territory will soon be re-occupied.

Such a fence is not complicated, a combination of netting not larger than 75mm mesh, dug in to prevent digging, with a stand-off electric wire to discourage climbing. Wet otters learn to dislike electric fences very quickly. Gateways need to have a sill to prevent digging. It is not in an otter's interest to waste much time in fighting a fence; far better to spend the energy getting its food from a more natural source nearby.

For further information about otters, or for advice about how to prevent undue predation, contact the Environment Agency (08708 506506), Somerset Wildlife Trust (01823 652400), or the Somerset Otter Group (01823 461655).



THE OTTER

OTTERS are solitary, territorial animals, nearly always found beside water.

Adults live alone, and claim a stretch of river which they defend against rivals by fighting.

DNA studies on the River Tone showed that each dog otter covered about 12 miles of the main river. Bitch otters used about 7 miles.

They patrol these beats constantly, so have many dwelling places (holts). Only when a bitch has young cubs will an otter remain in one place for long.

Because of this need for territorial space, they regulate their own population and prevent a high density.

In captivity, otters can live to the age of ten, but in the wild only one third reach their second birthday and the age at which they breed. There is no defined breeding season and, unless conditions are very favourable, a bitch cannot breed every year. Two or three cubs is the usual litter. Otters are naturally slow breeders.

Otters and their holts are fully protected by law, against all forms of damage or disturbance, intentional or unintentional. It is an offence under the CROW Act (2000) to disturb them by failing to take sufficient care; this could apply to a legal mink trap or a fyke net without an otter guard, for instance.