

Otters on the Somerset Levels.

Written by James Williams in 2006.



The Somerset Levels have always been considered a stronghold for otters, but a closer look at the recent factual evidence throws up doubt about this.

There is a long series of surveys and reports covering the Levels, in particular the Brue valley. The Late Miss EJ Lenton started regular spraint counts in 1972 and in 1997/98 Somerset Wildlife Trust employed four surveyors, who found a diminished set of evidence and very few signs on the tributary rivers.

The decline caused by the pesticides, dieldrin and aldrin, had taken effect.

The chemicals killed foxes and pigeons by the hundred, and almost exterminated birds of prey such as the peregrine.

Otters throughout Somerset were badly affected. The River Tone lost its otters completely for more than a decade, 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 1984 and 1985, surveyors located only two otters.

When the poisons were banned, things started to improve.

Otters spread back into Somerset from the West and gradually filled the rivers to the east, with the exception of a persistent empty area around Bridgwater- somewhere there was, and is, some excellent habitat which the otters had relished living in before the decline.

The 'Bridgwater Gap' was never fully explained, but it seems that it may have been a product of the acid ditch from the Royal Ordnance Factory, which was producing a lot of TNT at this time.

Whatever the cause, the ditch is now healthier, and the otters have moved into the gap.

But they have not entirely re-colonised the Levels as thoroughly as other rivers nearby.

For two years, from May 1997, detailed monthly searches were made on the Brue and the Tone, for a study into the feasibility of using DNA from their spraints to identify individual otters.

On the Tone, upstream of Taunton, there was evidence at all 67 sites visited, and the DNA revealed eight resident otters.

The "stronghold" of the Brue, however, managed evidence at only 26 of the 57 sites, and held only three residents.

This worrying trend still persists. In the 4th National Otter Survey in 2002, the national average score was 35%, but the Brue scored only 29% - up merely 2% on the previous survey, at a time when the Parrett in the southern half of the moors went from 14% to 55%, and the Axe scored 47%.

Somerset Otter Group's annual surveys continued to produce such poor statistics that in 2004 a major effort was made to examine the northern half of the Levels in detail.

Three days of intense effort at 78 sites throughout the valley gave an average score of 53% and cubs were reported from two areas.



Unhappily, this encouraging upturn was not repeated in 2005 and, despite two strong litters of cubs on the South Drain, there is little evidence to be found elsewhere and the North Drain seems very devoid of any activity.

The search continues of course.

On the Sedgemoor side of the Poldens, the otter population seems much more stable, perhaps because the Tone, Isle and Parrett have such a lot of good headwaters and otters can continually migrate in from the rich rivers of the Exe and the Taw to the West, as they did for the recovery after the crash.



The quality of the water may have something to do with the discrepancy - there are some nasty bits of pollution up the Brue, in the Sheppey, or at Pilton, for instance, and the dairy industry above Bruton seems much more intense than that on the Brendons or the Blackdowns – or the extent of the floodwaters in winter may reduce the otter capacity of the moors.

As otters are territorial, an animal displaced by weeks of deep water may well not find a place sufficient for its needs; their numbers may be limited to those that can find suitable habitat in the depths of winter, when the effective area of the levels and moors can be reduced in a bad year by 45 square miles.

But, in so many cases with these mysterious animals, we are mainly guessing.

Nobody really knows what their requirements are, or how they live.

To our eyes, the central area of the Avalon Marshes seems to provide excellent habitat, better than that of the Parrett catchment. The peat diggings have left plentiful fishponds, and good lying up areas nearby.

However, with it being so flat and so wet there can be few places where otters can find traditional holts in deep, hollow tree roots.

Otters spend many days lying above ground, anyway, curled up in a nice warm bush or bracken bed. Only in foul weather do they need a roof.

For having cubs they probably make one, building a nest out of twists of vegetation, but these will be well back in the marsh out of our ken.

In fact, the peat moors nowadays are as impassable to normal human entry as they were at the time King Alfred used this fact to defeat the invading Danes.

As a result we know so little about what goes on.

We do not know how large a territory an otter will defend in these boundless swamps.

The DNA study seemed to indicate that along a normal linear river, a dog otter might claim a dozen miles.

Could this desire for space govern the sparseness of our otters?

Many of those we send for post mortem examination have been fighting. Might this fighting for space affect the dispersal of the young when the litters break up?



We do not understand their diet, either. Might the shortage of otters in some areas be the result of Massive contamination by the nightly droppings of millions of starlings, which reduces the fish carrying potential of some of the waters?

Eels were always found to be a major part of an otters food, about 75% in some studies.

The eel population has recently undergone a massive decline, possibly because of a newly introduced parasitic nematode worm that infects their swim bladders. This may impede their migration back to the spawning grounds in the far Atlantic.

Whatever the reason, far fewer elvers now return, so presumably the otters will have to look elsewhere for their main meals.



They may take more waterfowl – some of the spraints on the moors contain feathers.

Or they may turn more to stocked fish, in angling lakes or ornamental ponds.

A considerable upturn of interest in fish rearing and the establishment of commercial fishing lakes occurred just at the time when otters were at their lowest population.

When the otters returned, they found that well stocked ponds with no defences had been established in their absence.

This inevitably led to some conflict with anglers, and to unfounded rumours that the otters had been released.

Luckily most of these problems can be resolved by fences.

The otters also found that mink, which first bred in the wild in this country in 1957, had taken over most of the rivers in their absence.

Despite criminal releases from fur farms, the otters had largely dealt with this by killing off the mink.

With a lot of competition among their own kind to contend with, they effectively eliminated the extra competition from the smaller, introduced aliens – except that on several parts of the Levels, a recent study has revealed many more mink than were suspected, and a trapping programme is being operated to protect the bird populations.

Introduced mink are, however, a minor problem for our otters compared with the most recently discovered interloper.

A new species of fluke has just been discovered in more than a dozen otter carcasses sent for post mortem from the Levels.

Nearly 500 otters have been examined over the years from across southern England, and only these few have shown the new symptoms of a diseased gall bladder - the first was in 2000.

It has also been found in half of a small sample of mink from the same area. New to Britain, this parasite has now been identified as a Russian native, probably introduced in a release of ornamental fish known as Sunbleak, which are now to be found in many parts of the Levels.

We do not know yet how serious an influence this may turn out to be.

Most sick otters may well curl up and die in their couches back among the reeds, and never come to our notice.

Yet, as most of the otters we found have been killed on the road, the disease may not be fatal.

However, it remains true that, from an area where we are unhappy about the success of the otter population, we have found a dozen dead otters, in various degrees of infection, over four years – a loss we can ill afford.

Meanwhile, our attempts at researching the requirements of these enigmatic and charismatic creatures must continue.

Usually we have to be content with spotting their territorial signals by means of their spraints, or with tracing their crossing path over a drove.

Only occasionally will we be vouchsafed a glimpse of the animal itself.

The Somerset Levels may present them, and us, with some special problems, but it is also a wonderful habitat for otters, and one of the few places where they managed to hold on to their existence at the most difficult of times.

Just as Alfred the Great saw off the threat of the intruding Danes, I hope the tenacity of our otters will overcome the Russian bug.