

# Blindness in Otters

by James Williams

I became interested in blindness in otters after finding three blind animals in the north west of England during the late seventies. This led me to collect data from otter hunting packs, fishermen and naturalists, especially those involved in carrying out otter surveys.

I obtained records on 22 otters from eleven different counties (see Table below). Of these two had been shot in the head, one had been blind in one eye since birth while the remaining 18 all had milky white and opaque eyes. Their age and condition varied considerably: 10 seemed to be in excellent condition while three were in a very poor state (one was starving and the other two were dying from liver disorders). Interestingly the blindness was not due solely to old age as one was a young adult and two others were cubs, all from different areas.

My earliest record of a blind otter was

in 1957 and the above mentioned 22 animals came to light between 1957-1980. Try as I might I could find no records for the previous 300 years: the time for which otter hunting had been recorded in England. As the recent generations of otter hunters seemed to be great diarists and many of the hunts kept detailed records suggest that this phenomenon must be a modern problem. I am not sure what the significance of this is although many people have said that blind otters heralded the start of the decline of the otter population in their area. However this may be a coincidence - not a cause and effect.

*Dr Ian Keymer a specialist in Zoo and Wildlife medicine (Pathology) has made the following comments on the above article:*

It is a great pity that carcasses of otters

that had previously been observed to be blind have so seldom been submitted for a full pathological examination. I find it particularly intriguing that 10/22 of the blind otters were regarded as being in good condition. I wonder if in fact they really were in good condition and if this was determined during life or at death.

There are many causes of blindness and this can be due to various parts of the eyes and caused by a variety of factors. It seems, however, that with otters we are dealing with blindness that is manifested by a whitish (milky) appearance of one or both eyes. This can be due to either keratitis or cataract.

Keratitis is an inflammation of the cornea and especially when unilateral is usually due to some type of trauma. The trauma results in infection of the surface of the eye(s) and this produces

| DATE    | COUNTY      | RIVER         | SEX | AGE       | REMARKS                           |
|---------|-------------|---------------|-----|-----------|-----------------------------------|
| 1957    | Oxford      |               | D   | adult     | nearly blind otherwise fit        |
|         | Lancs       | Greta         |     | adult     | both eyes opaque, distemper       |
| 1958/59 |             | Itchen        |     | adult     | shot                              |
| 1958/59 |             | Itchen        |     | adult     | shot                              |
| 1963    | Wilts       | Avon          |     |           |                                   |
| 1964    | Wilts       | Avon          |     |           |                                   |
| 1966    | Hants       | Avon          |     |           |                                   |
| 1966    | Westmorland | Bela          | D   | adult     | both eyes affected, tick infested |
| 1966    | Somerset    | Otter         | B   | adult     | blind in both eyes                |
| 1968    | Lancs       | Leighton Moss | D   | adult     | blind in both eyes                |
| 1969    | Dumfries    | Nith          | D   | adult     | both eyes white                   |
| 1969    | Cumbria     | Eden          | D   | adult     | blind in both eyes                |
| 1970    | Argyll      | nr Oban       | D   | sub-adult | blind in both eyes and starving   |
| 1971    | Norfolk     | Bure          |     | cub       | milky eyes                        |
| 1975    | Wilts       | Avon          |     | adult     | blind in both eyes                |
| 1978    | Lancs       | Leighton Moss |     | adult     | both eyes and liver necrosis      |
| 1979    | Somerset    | Tone          | B   | adult     | eyelid sealed                     |
| 1980    | Cumbria     | Derwent       | D   | adult     | liver swollen                     |
| 1980    | Norfolk     |               |     | adult     |                                   |