

The otter in Somerset.

Written by James Williams, 2010.

Most people are aware that otters suffered an enormous decline in numbers in Britain, and most of Europe, in the sixties and seventies, but few laymen are aware of just how nearly total the decline was. In the fifties England was almost fully populated with otters: they were virtually everywhere, and in sufficient numbers for young ones to have a problem finding vacant territory. By 1984 they had vanished almost to the point of extinction, not just in the industrial areas, but in rural areas too. The otters throughout Somerset were badly affected. The river Tone lost its otters completely for over 10 years, and for a long period held the world record for pesticide contamination of a dead carnivore. Matters were nearly as bad on the Levels; in 1981 a coordinated search of 99 known sites found evidence at only two, adjacent, bridges. After these chemicals were banned the situation 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 the Tone, and the areas where otters were still struggling to re-establish themselves, Wiltshire and beyond. But the results of the Environment Agency's recent 5th national survey show that they have now managed to become more secure and to expand across most of England again.

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 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. For this year's survey 136 teams looked for signs of otters at 584 places, over two consecutive days. The results were very encouraging: only 8 teams failed to find any evidence, which indicated that Somerset still has a widespread otter population, despite the continuing prevalence of a new threat – the parasitic bile fluke. 73% of the sites held otter evidence, and 16% showed that an otter had been there on the night of the survey itself. Interpretation of all this information suggested that we had located 66 territories.



For the second year we included the whole of Exmoor National Park, where we found the same number of occupied ranges, 24. 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.