

Memories of James Williams 1939-2014 Mary-Rose Lane



James was working on otters in the Westcountry long before many of us even realised we had otters here. From a countryside childhood in Westmorland James grew up absorbing its natural history and kindling a life long fascination and enthusiasm for wildlife. His families' connections with the Kendal and District Otter Hunt gave him a unique understanding and insight into the species from childhood. He started studying them - or the lack of them - in Somerset in the 1960's. When I met him in 1990, before otters returned to Somerset in any numbers, it was fun to pull his leg by inviting him into Devon to see an otter... It appealed to his dry wit but was just a friendly jibe because the reality is that most of us learnt our otters from James.

What I admired and respected most about James's route to knowledge is that it was learnt from his own experience and field observation as well as research and reading. A long time ago he told me of his friend Dick Treleavan who studied and watched peregrine falcons off the north Cornish coast for nearly 50 years. James was hugely admiring of Dick's commitment to the observed truth, but it is what he had too - everything I ever learnt from James was based on this.

I met him when we both worked with the Wildlife Trusts Otters and Rivers Projects and realised our 'otter patches' overlapped in east Devon and Exmoor. There was no 'get off my river' though, but an open welcome into his world and the beginning of a fantastic and hugely valued friendship. He was a power house of ideas, and had the persuasive ability to get most of them acted upon - I can only give a taste of this here. He persuaded the Environment Agency to include Somerset otters in the post mortem contract with Vic Simpson and by doing so opened up the research into the liver fluke.

His contributions were fundamental to the work on otter spraint DNA analysis that started the now well-established research at Cardiff University. He persuaded the Highways Agency and Somerset County Council to improve endless river bridges with safer otter passage and visited numerous fisheries with otter fencing advice. He taught us how to study and understand otters and their signs in the field. A mutual friend described this skill perfectly: *"To say his passion and enthusiasm was infectious was testified by his ability to build from nothing the Somerset Otter Group. He inspired individuals of many walks of life to survey rivers for an animal that many have never seen and might still only ever know from a small and odiferous dropping after years of searching. In my mind's eye he is always standing, leaning slightly on a long stick surveying the scene, reading all that nature is showing him and becoming part of the scene, more than just an observer of it."*

James was a superb wordsmith, and we are lucky enough to have his thoughts and work recorded in publications and articles dating back to the mid 1960's. His published books are a real insight into the world of otters. He often said to me that he considered himself an unpaid amateur at this stuff, but be very sure that he was the one to listen to. My more recent fondest memories of James are at a couple of meetings - at the Institute for Fisheries Management meeting for fishery managers, where a group of us conservation types had to defend our pro-otter positions very robustly! James's turn of phrase, his frankness and wealth of examples had some of the toughest in the audience having to concede, in most ungracious ways, but they did! The second was last October to the Devon Mammal Group where he spoke to over 100 people. Although by then already ill, few in the room knew it, such was his professionalism.

Last autumn James received an MBE for his work with the Somerset Otter Group and he admitted that he was even prouder to be made a Fellow of the Linnean Society last year.

To quote Garrison Keilor, *"it is disappointing to become a leading authority in the field when you still have so much you want to learn..."*. I'm not sure James ever considered himself a leading authority on otters, but he was. He died wanting to continue and complete his work, and with plans for new projects and research. Such inexhaustible energy and his enquiring mind is something we somehow have to try to live up to, to continue where he left off - for James and for the otters he dedicated so much of his life to.

When asked by Somerset Wildlife Trust what he enjoyed most about volunteering his reply said everything: "It's hard to select the best. When things go well, i.e. the latest survey, or when you get younger people enthused, and know that the baton will be carried on. Or best of all, when I see a superb otter, and reflect that we so nearly lost them, and now we have the basis of a small, but sustainable population."

That is some legacy, from an extra-ordinary man.