

James Williams

Naturalist and country sportsman who used his skills to help protect otters

‘My advice is not to choose a chocolate brown, nocturnal animal with no distinguishing features, which is notoriously nomadic, and which spends most of its time under water anyway.’ That was James Williams’ advice to his students, yet it is advice he chose not to heed. That there are otters in Somerset at all is in no small measure due to Williams’ work.

James Leigh Roslin Williams was born into a family deeply immersed in country sports. His father was joint master and huntsman of the Kendal & District Otterhounds and, from four years old, James did not miss a season with them until all otter-hunting voluntarily ceased in 1978.

The family lived at Mansergh near Kirby Lonsdale, and used the name ‘Mansergh’ for their breeds of sporting dogs. They moved to Lilymere near Sedbergh in 1948 where Williams spent most of his childhood enjoying and learning about the English countryside. The beautiful lake, the woods and little grouse-moor at Lilymere were an ideal base for a naturalist. Being in the field with Williams later in his life was always rewarding. Time and again he would draw attention to some quirk of behaviour which showed that he was seeing the world from the point of view of the animal. It was this that made him such an outstanding huntsman, fisherman, naturalist and conservator.

Williams went to Sedbergh School where, he said, the physics master deterred several generations of boys from enjoying science. This led Williams to read English literature instead of biology when he went to St Andrew’s University.

When he was eighteen, his father died and he took on the Mansergh line of cocker spaniels, winning many field trial awards with them. He became joint master of the Kendal & District and also a distinguished judge of otterhounds. On one occasion, a puppy that had been winning other shows, came before him but Williams did not like the feel of its coat. Suspecting that it was not waterproof, he sent for a bucket of water, drenched it and sent the puppy out. The hunt staff were so incensed that they changed out of their uniforms in silent protest.

In 1967, Williams moved south to teach English at Taunton School where he eventually became a housemaster. The next year he married Elizabeth Stansell and they moved into a thatched farm-worker's cottage outside Taunton. Williams immediately joined the Taunton Fly Fishing Club and was chairman for fourteen years, then its president. He took his field sports to the highest level and became, with Elizabeth, a skilled salmon fisher. They had a beat on the River Taw in Devon and went often to Scotland and, during retirement, to Alaska, Russia and Iceland. Williams hunted regularly with local beagles and fox- and staghounds and became well known for his knowledge of the countryside.

For many years he had a gun at the Triscombe shoot on the Quantock Hills whose reputation for high and sporting birds was widely envied. During his eleven years' captaincy of the shoot, he once ordered: 'No woodcock on the next drive because one of them isn't; it's a Great Snipe – a refugee from Siberia.' His interest in birds was such that he reckoned to have seen more than three thousand species in various parts of the world. But his special love was the mammals, and otters in particular. He could never work up enthusiasm for plants and fungi, exclaiming impatiently, 'They don't *behave*.'

Williams had much satisfaction from being chairman of the Culmstock Otterhounds when they celebrated their bicentenary, though by that time they had become minkhounds. It was a small landmark in a lifetime devoted to rivers and otters. As a child in the last years of a countryside before DDT and a host of other industrial toxins had slaughtered the wild animals of England, Williams had kept detailed notebooks of his observations of natural history in general and otters in particular. Tragically, in a fit of teenage intellectual arrogance, he threw away those priceless records. He soon realised his mistake and began them again; but he could never replace one of the very few sets of regular data from before the catastrophic collapse of otters' English population during the 1970s.

Williams' first book, *The Otter Among Us*, describes generally the otter in Britain. His second, *The Otter*, is a more personal account of his life devoted to the species. A highly-charged passage tells how he searched the river Tone for otters in 1973 and found evidence of one possible individual; then nothing for fourteen dark years. The horror of this stirred Williams into trying to answer the question, 'Why had the largest predator in Britain disappeared from 95% of England?'. He followed many lines of enquiry, including hunt records from which he extracted the frequency of blank days. Unlike in fox-hunting where one expects to find several foxes in a day, otters have linear territories which they defend

against others. If a hunt found more than one otter in a day, they were either at the end of a territory or following a bitch with cubs, in which case they called off hounds. A blank day signalled an empty territory and was a good indicator of population. Williams gathered this hard evidence and noticed a significant rise in blank days during the 1960s. He also recorded coincidental cases of blind otters. Looking at hunting trophies, he noticed tooth-scarring – again the frequency rose in the mid 1960s, which was also the time when Canadian mink escaped into the wild from fur farms. Coincidence does not prove cause and effect but it can signal it. Williams suspected that feral mink carried some disease related to distemper or hardpad and had infected the indigenous otter population. He summarised his findings and presented them to an NGO but was told that hunt records were ‘ethically contaminated’. Williams commented that presumably the NGO thought that their moral stance was more valuable in conservation than otterhounds’ noses.

Williams never discarded the mink-borne disease line of enquiry and argued that top predators weakened by chemical poisoning may well become prone to diseases – especially new ones. Even so, it was sensible to concentrate on the harder evidence of pesticides, which also reached a peak of application during the 1960s. With this factor now widely accepted as the main cause of the otter population crash, and having found evidence of their return, Williams set out to monitor the species in the low-lying and frequently waterlogged county of Somerset.

In the 1980s he became chairman of The Somerset Otter Group and, under his guidance, it grew into a significant environmental movement. Not many county-based organisations can field more than 100 volunteers for a full weekend, but Williams’ did. In the annual two-day event, volunteers were allocated stretches of river or mere which they visited twice to note changes in evidence of otter activity. Using this material, Williams judged which signs were of separate animals and so could say with reasonable accuracy that there were 67 occupied otter territories in Somerset on that weekend in 2013. Since otters are top predators in the freshwater ecosystem, they are also a useful indicators of environmental changes; and this was the theme in many of his lectures.

Williams not only raised funds for research but also contributed personally, so enabling the Cardiff University team to present their research to the International Union for the Conservation of Nature Otter Specialist Group conference in Italy in 2011. He privately donated the costs of a student from Nepal to attend that conference. Over the years, he funded

several students to work on otters in Somerset. His generosity was even greater in terms of time and effort: he collected huge numbers of spraints (otter droppings) for studies into chemical contamination, parasites and attempts at identifying individuals through DNA analysis. He was the Somerset centre for collecting dead otters – usually road-kills – and sending them first to Vic Simpson of The Wildlife Veterinary Investigation Centre, and later to Cardiff University, when Simpson's funding was withdrawn.

Today, it is hard to understand the reluctance of officials, charged with protecting the environment, to deal with new ideas. In the 1960s and '70s, when evidence from naturalists and the hunts was pouring in, there appeared to be an almost deliberate evasion by government of anything unusual. In his book, *The Otter*, Williams was excoriating in his criticism of this attitude and it is clear that it was largely through his persistence that officials took notice. Much the same happened in 2004 when Vic Simpson found a new liverfluke in an otter Williams had sent him. The two men published the discovery and eventually traced its source to the importation and escape of a species of Eastern European coarse fish. The parasite can also infect cats and dogs and possibly humans. This time, Williams' efforts did at least get a question asked in Parliament.

In 2013, Williams was elected a Fellow of the Linnean Society of London and appointed MBE. He is survived by his wife, his son, his daughter, and two grandsons with a third due this month.

James Williams, otter-man, was born on February 5, 1939. He died on February 4, 2014.