



## Somerset Otter Group Autumn 2014 update

### Letter from Simon Reece

'All involved with SOG will be delighted to hear that Robert Williams has returned to the UK and has taken over as chairman. His experience and connections will be invaluable for the future development of the group, especially of its research. As my tenure has been short-lived and the timing of the handover such that it happened just at the moment when I had at last got time to begin to address the matters I had been asked to consider, I'm afraid I don't have anything to report.

Although my time has been brief, I have been struck by what a fabulous endeavour SOG is. The work undertaken by the group is vast in amount and vital in importance.

I'm sure that no-one will need to be encouraged to remain committed. If you are a 'two-day eventer' a regular surveyor, a 'camera trapper' or a collector and collator of data, you are all vital cogs in SOG's machine. And even the best oiled machine stops if just the smallest cog fails.

I wish Rob very well as Chairman – we have a brilliant team with him and several vital others and then the county-wide team of supporters and contributors. SOG will continue to achieve very much under their leadership. Do support them and above all else enjoy your ottering!'

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### Camera Traps.

Gareth Hoare has continued to get amazing photos from his camera traps. These two are from almost twenty photographs taken from two otters which were around for almost an hour, mid afternoon near Wells, enjoying an eel.



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### SOG supporting research proposals.

In October last year, James's last talk was at the Natural History Museum in London. He had for some time been in discussion with them about research into the fluke, *Pseudamphistomum Truncatum*. James's initial work has been followed up and the NHM with Kingston University propose conducting a years Masters Research on the spread of the fluke within Somerset. This will be achieved through the identification of fluke eggs in otter spraints. A further study would attempt to identify the genetic immunity of the otters to discover if there is a difference between those otters carrying fluke and those not.

Cardiff University are at the stage of seeking funding for genetic PHD studies on the otter, the Somerset Otter Group have agreed to be CaSE partners in the research. The River Tone would be central to the research, this would entail us assisting in the collection of fresh spraint from the catchment over three years. Such a study would be a fitting tribute to James's personal detailed and extensive study of the Tone. It's success is dependent now upon a suitable student being found to compete with other students. Only two of the 9 projects will be successful for the funding, so all fingers crossed that Liz Chadwick can get the right student.

## The Stanley Duncan Conservation Trophy

James Williams was recently awarded a conservation award posthumously. The award was collected by James's wife Elizabeth and their son Rob. There is a full write up with photos on the Somerset Otter Group Website <http://www.somersetottergroup.org.uk/?p=701> and follow the link

## Otter cubs

Tony House has allowed the following beautiful photographs of cubs, taken in 2012 to be shared with the group. Please let Jo Pearse know of any sightings or suspicions of cubs, to maintain our breeding otter records. [sogjopearse@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:sogjopearse@yahoo.co.uk) or 07855773697. Please note these pictures have been shared with goodwill, strictly no copying without Tony's permission. Thank you.



## Otter deaths

Two unexplained separate otter deaths were found this year in May and June in the Tone catchment. Although there were no obvious causes, the otters being found dead on the river bank, both otters were very underweight. The collectors Mel Keating and Lucy Mead were concerned. Mel contacted Cardiff University to ask to have the post mortems fast tracked, offering to transport the otters herself. Along with Margaret Davies, they were lucky, on arrival at Cardiff, to be invited to observe a post mortem. Mel's account of the trip is below, a 'Cardiff Adventure'.

Unfortunately, no obvious cause of death could be found in either otters. The emaciated condition of the otters is cited as the cause of death, but no clues as to what caused them to be in such condition.

Jo Pearse has contacted respected wildlife vet Vic Simpson to ask if he would be able to carry out a post mortem on any subsequent otters found in a similar condition. Vic has the expertise as a pathologist to give more in-depth post mortems. As he will only accept very fresh and unfrozen otters, the speed with which we can collect the otter and deliver it to his Cornwall surgery is paramount.

Vic is also interested in small mustelids for post mortems, so if you find any weasels, stoats or polecats, he will accept these frozen, they can be taken to West Hatch RSPCA Centre who will store them and transport to Cornwall (no badgers or mink please).

So far this year, we have had 18 dead otters reported, most of which have been recovered for Cardiff University.

We have still been unable to find a location for the freezer housed at Natural England in Shapwick, if any surveyors know of a place to house the freezer, please do let Jo Pearse know, who can arrange transport.



## A Cardiff Adventure

I have been surveying for almost two years now, and I have to confess that I have developed an addiction to all things Otter, fuelled partly by listening to a talk by James Williams of 2013 and partly by my mentor Margaret Davis who still stomps the river banks with me. The more I learn about these elusive animals amongst us, the more I seem to have to know. So when we had two dead otters brought in, very close together in dates and geography from the Tone Catchment with similar emaciation and no obvious signs of death I obviously wanted to know the cause of their demise as quickly as possible. Since West Hatch's freezers had recently been emptied it would mean a long wait until another batch was taken across to Cardiff, so with the help of Lucy, I liaised with the Cardiff team to drop the otters off one day when I was passing by. Following in the theme of wanting to know more, it quickly developed into an adventure.

It seems like an age ago now, but one day back in August Lucy, Margaret and I embarked to cross the bridge to Wales to visit Liz Chadwick and her team at Cardiff University. We found ourselves crossing the bridge with 3 dead bodies in the boot in a polystyrene ice box that made itself heard all the way there (think of that chalk on blackboard sound that makes everyone wince) and me hoping that we wouldn't be stopped by an inquisitive policeman!

Once there we parked easily as the team had arranged us a spot, then we just had to wheel our precious cargo up the street into the lab building hoping we wouldn't attract too much attention, with the lyrics of "off I went with the body in the bag" replaying in my head!



Liz and the team were most welcoming and once kitted out in white lab coats we joined them to watch the PM of two otters. Liz put up with us asking questions throughout about what samples they take and why, how they identify the age of the otter etc. The sense of relief of not passing out on the lab floor and shaming all surveyors everywhere was immense, as I have to say that watching a PM certainly makes you see a different side to the otter that I am usually looking for on the river banks. I came away with a far better understanding of what they get up to in the lab and the importance of the work the surveyors do by picking up our dead otters. Hopefully we will have the results of the two from the Tone very soon.

In the afternoon we had time to sit with Liz to discuss the work that the group is doing and the work the Otter Project is doing. There is so much scope to continue the work James Williams has started and for future work. There are still so many unanswered questions about what our otters get up to and where, so much that we don't know that we need to explore through project's such as Cardiff's but it is of course all funding dependant. As Lucy said to me after our visit "If we need any encouragement that James's partnership with Cardiff University and the groups direction with otter research should continue, it is this quote from Liz Chadwick during our visit, *'The Somerset Otter Group is a unique group in the whole of the UK and therefore I would say in the world.'* Something to be very proud of and a legacy to work hard to protect".

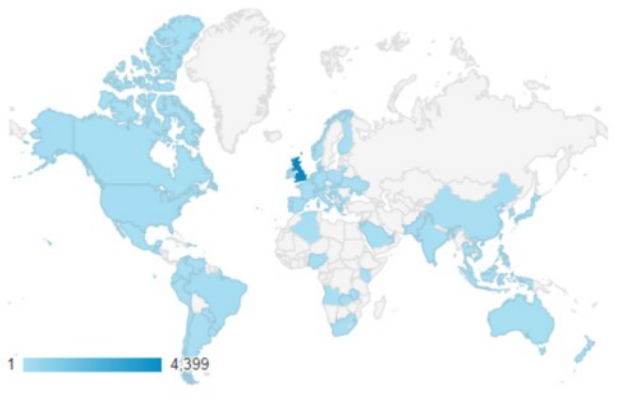
**Mel Keating.**

## Shapwick Talk

On the 17<sup>th</sup> August 2014, SOG member, Dion Warner gave an informative talk on otters to introduce Natural England's Otter Day on Shapwick Heath Reserve. The talk was followed by a walk around the reserve looking out for spraints, runs and anything else of interest. The hides were used for looking out across the lakes. No otters were seen, but a very pleasant day.



## Websites.



The map highlights in blue the countries where people have viewed our SOG website. People from 72 countries since November 2011. In the last 3 months there have been 412 visits from 326 people from 37 countries. Brazil showed 36 people, coinciding with the **International Otter Conference** held in Brazil and attended by Rob Williams.

Details of the conference, held on 11<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> August this year can be found on the following site;

[www.facebook.com/ottercongress](http://www.facebook.com/ottercongress)

## Flood works.

The local and national newspapers are telling us that the government are taking steps to minimise the risk of flooding to the levels following the devastation to homes and disruption of travel about the county at the start of the year. Please do let Jo Pearse know if there are works on a river near you that is significant enough to affect the local otter. The relevant agencies can be contacted to see if they have mitigations in place.

## Surveyors handbook.

Contact Jo if you would like the newly updated and re-published handbook for surveyors, available for £10.

## Diary Dates.

The two day event will be on 25<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> April 2015.

The next full meeting will be in the new year.