

## **Janet Dixon.**



The Somerset Otter Group would like to give its sincere condolences to the family and friends of Janet Dixon, who sadly died on Tuesday 23<sup>rd</sup> of June 2015.

She had been unwell prior to the two day event in April but as usual insisted on doing her lions share of surveys in the area. She believed the ill health was due to the stress after the recent death of John. Sadly pancreatic cancer took hold very rapidly.

In true Janet style when she knew her time was limited she set about finding a replacement to continue her otter surveys on the River Avil, this was one of the items on her bucket list. Whilst in the hospice she was found using the copier in the office, intent on remaining active to the very end. Our loss cannot compare to that of her family and close friends but the otter group will miss the energy, drive, knowledge, experience and steadfast support of Janet. She will be known best to all the surveyors on the North Somerset streams around Minehead, a large number of whom have been recruited and trained by Janet.



John and Janet Dixon giving support to James Williams at an otter training day, Simondsbathe 2010.

Janet has been surveying for the Somerset Otter group since 1999 and has made many literary contributions to the newsletters and research papers. In a review of James Williams's first book she wrote, 'I have been hooked on otters since I read Ring Of Bright Water, as a young teenager and consequently I have read everything I could find on the subject.'

A piece Janet wrote for the otter group research papers in 2010, is fittingly repeated below.



## OTTERS ON THE RIVER AVILL CATCHMENT

*Janet Dixon*

My name is Janet Dixon and with my husband John I have been surveying the River Avill on the edge of Exmoor every month since 2000.

The River Avill rises on Exmoor to the west of Dunkery Gate below Dunkery Beacon SS8940 and wanders down through wooded combes and eventually reaches the sea some 10 miles later on Dunster Marsh SS997455. It is a busy, rocky river with several tributary streams and it reacts to heavy rain on Exmoor to become a torrent in places. There are 2 weirs. The first one at Pitt Bridge is a dangerous one for otters when the river is in spate as they cut off the corner with the weir and come out onto the road where they are vulnerable to fast moving traffic. The second one inland from the village of Dunster has a mill leat running off the top of it and this provides a safe route for the otters when the river is fast flowing. The river flows under the A39 at Loxhole Bridge. The river flows through a sluice here which is the favoured route of otters going up and down the river and is passable except when the river is in spate.

The river is in good condition and has plenty of fish, mainly brown trout which reach a good size. The marsh where the river reaches the sea is crisscrossed with ditches rich in fish and eels. In Butlins Holiday Camp there are ponds containing tench and the moat on two sides of the camp is also fish rich. Also there are lakes in the Dunster Beach holiday chalet complex which are brimful with fish and the wooded islands provide an otter's paradise.

We have 9 survey sites on the main river, mainly bridges. We cover the lakes by the chalets and several sites on the marsh.

In 2001 there was the serious Foot and Mouth outbreak and the Otter Group decided not to survey on farmland between February and July. During this time we obtained from the council a map with all the ditches and water courses in and around the town of Minehead and to our surprise we found otter activity on all of these. As a result of this survey we included the Bratton Stream which runs through the Parks Walk in our monthly survey. We found evidence of an otter using this stream and the culverts either to the sea or branching to the right to Butlin's moat and Dunster Marsh. This route was used regularly until that particular otter was run over outside the swimming pool.

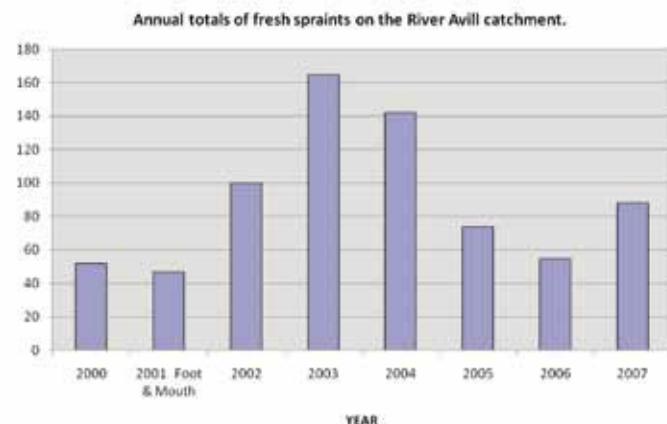
In the early years of our surveys we were confident that we had two female otters on the river with home ranges at Avill Farm and Dunster Marsh. This was backed up by evidence of sightings and corpses of cubs found, and confirmation of their ages from the post mortem reports. but over the years we have lost these females and there has been no evidence of cubs for the last 3 years.



Year	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec
2000	1											1
2001	1	4	1									1
2002												1
2003		1	1									
2004												
2005				1						1		
2006									1			
2007												
2008												

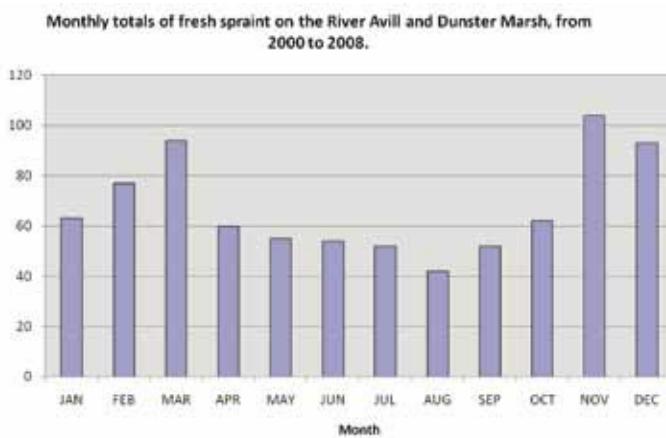
The winter deaths correspond with the river being very high and the otters leaving the water and crossing the roads. However the two in 2003 occurred when there was machinery in the river for major repairs and the otters came off the river before they reached the sluice at Loxhole Bridge and found themselves on the main road. The two recorded in summer occurred when river was very low. Whenever we have had a death reported or recovered a corpse we have done another survey a few days later and have always found fresh spraint.

To monitor the activity on the river I have totalled the number of fresh spraints found each month for each year:

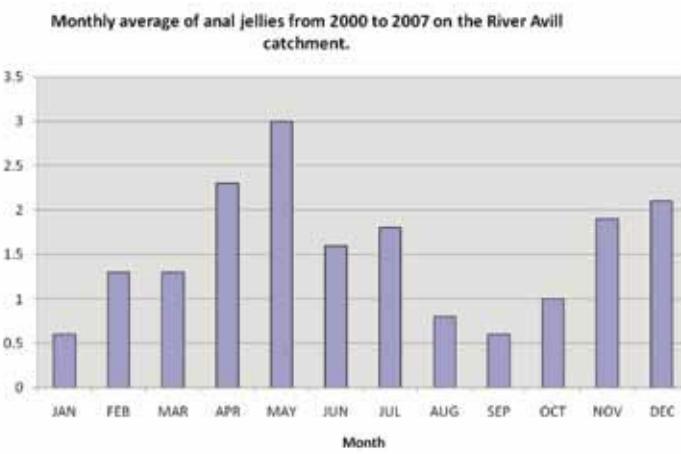


The years of 2002, 2003 and 2004 were the high spots of our recording when we were confident we had two breeding females on the river.

I wondered if there was a pattern to the monthly activity on the river and I have produced a graph which indicates that otters are more active on the river during the winter months.



I have also monitored fresh anal jelly to see if this was produced more at certain times of the year and so far I have found this inconclusive.



Numbers of fresh anal jellies found each month from 2000 to 2008

We have never found any signs of mink during our years of surveying and the sightings of these animals have been very few.

Sightings of the otters are a rare and exciting experience. Although we have watched our area on different occasions we have yet to see them on the Avill or marsh. We do encourage reports of sightings to be sent to us so that we can build up a picture of the otter population in the area. The green keepers on Minehead Golf Course which adjoins the marsh see them from time to time early in the morning and people walking their dogs at dusk have been lucky. The Avill is a good healthy river and could support one or two females with visiting dog otters and we have always found evidence that the river is used whenever we do our surveys.