

**SOMERSET OTTER GROUP
NEWSLOTTER 12**

MARCH 2002

SPRING MEETING

A record number of members and guests packed the Victory Inn on 4th March. Their enthusiasm was rewarded by a brilliant talk from our most distinguished speaker to date, the award winning wildlife pathologist, Vic Simpson. He has done all the otter post-mortems for the South-west of England, with records and data going back over twelve years.

Throughout his career as a busy practising Vet, Vic Simpson has always managed to fit some involvement with wildlife into his work, firstly in Africa, where he did exciting things like darting Buffalo, and later in the English Midlands, where one of his major pieces of research was the discovery that the decline in Mute Swans was caused by the ingestion of lead weights discarded by anglers. Before his recent retirement he was at the MAFF research lab in Polwhele, near Truro, where he worked on a wide variety of species besides of course the badgers involved in the TB outbreaks in cattle.

Yet it was ten years before he had his first otter brought in. At that time they were so very rare throughout England and Wales that he thought he might not get another chance at an otter, so he did a meticulously thorough necropsy.

As the years passed he started to get a few more otter corpses, initially from Cornwall, and slowly from western Devon. At one stage his superiors at MAFF ordered him to stop wasting time and resources on these unimportant and fringe animals, but luckily he didn't hear too clearly, and carried on in his own time at his own cost. Belatedly the powers that be woke up to the fact that top predators can indicate valuable information about what is going wrong in the environment, and his clandestine research was eventually supported by the Environment Agency. But only until the time that he had to retire from MAFF.

On retirement Vic, who is rightly convinced of the vital importance of his wildlife work in the absence of a government Wildlife Department such as the British initiated in all their overseas territories, set up and equipped his own dedicated wildlife pathology laboratory. As one might imagine, this was a costly investment. Already he has a variety of projects and contracts, into such diverse things as stoats and weasels, or blood parasites in bats. But all this work depends on funding, and at present most of the otter work, by which he sets such store (as do others, Swedish gynaecologists for instance), is on hold pending the provision of some money, and all the otters are going into the freezers. This is a pity, as freezing the tissues impedes some of the microscopic and histological investigations. Fresh corpses are much more informative.

Although the EA has indicated their strong support for him to continue the otter work, it has not yet managed to overcome its own procedures, and actually get the contract in place. So Vic was very grateful for the generosity of our members, who put nearly £100 into the red tin. This will help to keep the pot boiling until things are better organised.

Listening to his explanations of the history of the pollutants in our environment, it was hard to decide which was more shocking, the extent of the damage done, or the persistence of the ignorance and inertia of those who ought to have been in control. It was the American fur farmers that alerted the world to the poisoning of the Great Lakes, not the health authorities. Their mink were suffering all sorts of deformities and disease from being fed on the offcuts of fish

which were destined for the human food markets. It was the Cornwall Wildlife trust which led the way in getting the last use of dieldrin banned, although the authorities knew that its continued use on the bulb fields was making the eels and fish in West Country rivers unfit for human consumption.

But it was not all bad news. There is a trend towards improvement, and his graphs showed very neatly how the otters are gradually expanding eastwards along the south coast counties of England. Other slides showed how the levels of pollutant stored in the fatty tissue are declining rapidly, but the fact that bitches seem to carry a lesser burden than dogs is less than reassuring: the probable reason is that they offload their PCBs and pesticides into their newborn cubs in the colostrum; This may account for some of the defects and deformities Vic showed in his slides, but of course many cubs so exposed in infancy will die in the nest. What we were shown must be the tip of an iceberg, as the majority of dead otters that find their way to Truro are killed by cars. Even so many are carrying severe wounds from fighting, bitches as well as dogs, as the wince-inducing slides also very graphically portrayed.

Vic's research has exposed so many areas of concern, and the bad news looked so startling on the screen that it almost obscured the message that there is room for optimism. There are more otters around, and they are getting healthier: one cannot make a slide of that. But Vic emphasised that they are still not very widespread or plentiful. Although the 4th National Otter Survey will undoubtedly show an increase again when it is published in July, I doubt if it will show a strong position overall. Probably fewer than half the sites checked will have carried otter signs, and the eastern end of our otter-favoured county had a weak result compared with the western area.

So it was especially apposite and relevant to our group that so busy a man found time to address us. We have contributed our "fair share" of his bodies over recent years, and his lively and informed talk served to show us that we must continue to do so, and to keep a close eye on our recovering population. Not only might they suffer a setback, but their continuing health is linked to that of the whole water-based environment, which also affects us.

POINTS FROM THE BUSINESS MEETING

It was agreed that the 2-day Event should be held as proposed on **25/26th May**. Please give us warning if you will be unable to cover your patch then, so that we can find a substitute. Try to do your sites early on the Saturday so as to leave no fresh scent on them; wash or scratch over the evidence so that you can be sure of what has been freshly deposited on the Saturday night when you revisit on Sunday morning. Remember that on the Sunday we do not need detail of every single spraint or footprint in one small area. Once you have established that the otter was around, drive on some distance, to try for a different one; the aim is to find the full range used by otters, not the finer points of their habits. Then we will meet at the Victory Inn at lunchtime to compare notes and compile the maps.

Fyne Court Exhibition; the appeal for people to put up a display for us failed to produce a stampede of volunteers.

RESULTS

An appeal for a prompt return of your sheets in April, for several reasons. Firstly Saranne has a lot of work to do to enter them up. Secondly this year they will be used to compile a survey, comparable to the National Otter Survey, for the missed out 50km square between Dunster and Glastonbury. The national surveys are based on a chess board of 50km squares, and only the

"black" squares are ever looked at. So the important central area of Somerset, with all the Tone, much of the Parrett, and most of the Levels, has never featured in the charts. Now that we have such a strong group and so widespread a cover, we ought to be able to remedy this if the results are available in time.

The Brue. Until the end of our DNA collections the Brue continued to produce disappointing statistics. It is hoped to be able to focus on this area, to ascertain the true position. Cubs have recently been seen on one of the reserves, but a bitch was run-over on the Alham .

DAILY RECORDING

Several people manage to record one site daily, either because it is in their garden or because they walk the dog past it. It looks as if this information could be of wider interest than just Somerset. Dr. Paul Chanin discussed this with James Williams recently, and made some sound suggestions.

Enter your findings daily, but present them as three totals per calendar month. Firstly, the total number of days you actually checked that month. Flooding, flu or holidays may have made you miss a few meaningful checks; this does not matter, as long as you keep a score of how many days you were able to get a proper result. Secondly, the number of days on which you scored fresh evidence; obviously, if your otter donates a spraint, which then lasts for a week, that is a score of one, not seven. And it does not have to be spraints only; padding counts as a positive visit. Finally, a total number of spraints counted: a bitch and cubs may leave you 4 spraints on each visit, a solitary animal only one, or two if it goes up and back in the same night. So a monthly total gives a rough idea of the amount of activity going on.

In addition we need to know the location of the site (this will not be published beyond SERC!) and its nature; is it a low boulder on a minor side stream, or a path round an impassable weir on a major river, or a ledge under a bridge. Or, did you make it, an artificial otter loo, as recommended in all the best books?

I think at least six members are doing a daily check, on their way to the papershop, or while taking the dog out. Dr Chanin says that after a few months such a series of records starts to have real statistical validity, and the longer you go on the better the information. The more the merrier, of course: buy a dog, and a barrowload of rocks to make the otter loo, and join in at once. Results to Saranne please, with the records you will be sending in so soon.

POSTMORTEM BOOM PREDICTED??

It is not often that the editorial staff of this high-standard periodical condescend to quote from other journalistic organs, believing as we do that as they are more general in their outlook and coverage they are bound to be less well informed and lacking in intellectual rigour. However we feel duty bound to make an exception in the case of a recent article in the Daily Telegraph, which seemed especially relevant to our researches in the light of Vic Simpson's recent lecture. It reads as follows:

"MOTORWAY VERGES TO BE WILDLIFE HAVENS
A 10-YEAR PLAN TO ENCOURAGE SOME OF Britain's rarest species of wildlife along main roads and motorways was announced by the Highways Agency yesterday. Among the species that will benefit are the otter and water vole."

You have been warned.

ENCOUNTERS WITH OTTERS

My first encounter with a European otter came when I was doing field mapping in Glenelg, in the Northwest Highlands of Scotland in the early 1980's. Glenelg peninsula lies between Lochalsh, Loch Duich and Loch Hourn, across the narrowest part of the sound of Sleat from Skye. It is reached by a single-track road over a steep mountain pass, and since it is not on the road to anywhere else it misses the main tourist traffic. You could take the small 4-car ferry across to Skye, or the post boat across Loch Hourn to Knoydart, one of the wildest and most remote parts of the Highlands. Glenelg attracts mainly walkers and geologists, since it encompasses several notable geological 'type-localities'.

I spent parts of three summers mapping in the hills and along the rocky shoreline. During one particularly hot, still spell I thought it would be sensible to map the coastline near Letterfearn, where the onshore breeze would keep the midges at bay. My work consisted of taking measurements close to the rock surface, so I was sitting on a rocky promontory doing this when I became aware that I was being observed. I looked around, and not twenty feet away in a deep inlet was an otter studying me with interest. For about ten minutes we watched each other. The otter periodically dived down into the seaweed, to emerge again a few feet away. It seemed quite unalarmed by my presence, and after about ten minutes it disappeared, and I did not see it again. Being at that time concerned with matters geological I did not pursue the acquaintance. The only person I encountered along that stretch of shore was another geologist, so I imagine the otter lived a peaceful and undisturbed life.

Incidentally, Sandaig Bay, where Gavin Maxwell had his hideaway and where he wrote 'Ring of Bright Water', is also on the Glenelg peninsula. It is one of the geological 'type localities' so I've visited it often. It is reached by a steep forestry track, and is very isolated. It gets few visitors, although passing sailing boats may heave to in the shelter of the bay. The small sandy beach there is sheltered from the racing tides of the Sound of Sleat by a rocky headland which at high tide is an island. The ruins of Maxwell's cottage can still be seen, and there is a stone marker placed to remind visitors. It's a lovely spot on a warm sunny summer day, but I should think it would be a fearful place during a roaring winter storm, and Glenelg has its share of those.

For anyone visiting the Highlands, with time to spare, I'd recommend a visit. The road to Glenelg takes off from the A87 (to Kyle of Lochalsh) at the southern tip of Loch Duich. The road goes over the pass of Mam Rattagan and down to Glenelg village, and on down the coast to Arnisdale. There is a hotel in Glenelg, and several B&B's in Glenelg and Arnisdale. Sandaig bay is on the Wills Estate, and permission may have to be sought to visit it. It is a steep 1 mile walk down to the Bay. A road along the south side of Loch Duich (it branches off the Glenelg Road before you go over Mam Rattagan pass) leads to Letterfearn, and the track along the shore where I saw the otter.

P.S. During the past 5 years that we have been surveying on Exmoor for otters we have found plenty of spraint, and not infrequently sandcastles. But only once did we have the good fortune to spot an otter. It was early in the morning in August as we were doing our regular monthly survey. We have one site which is on the banks of a very small stream, a tributary of the Barle, which runs alongside a flooded limestone quarry. We saw two otters, one larger than the other, so we presume they were bitch and half-grown cub, very briefly. When they heard us the larger went over the bank into the quarry, and the smaller disappeared into the shadow below the bank, and did not emerge. Later examination showed a 4 in. diameter pipe went through the bank, presumably carrying excess water into the quarry, and the cub must have gone through that.

Saranne Cessford