

**SOMERSET WILDLIFE TRUST OTTER GROUP  
NEWSLOTTER 13  
SEPTEMBER 2002**

*AWW*

**From The Chairman:**

**TWO-DAY EVENT: 25/26 May 2002**

For the first time our annual two day event was affected by the weather; the results that did come in seemed to show our otters are still around in good numbers in the west, but that it is not possible to be as confident in east of the county. Unfortunately we had no result from as many as 12 members, which meant that our coverage of the important areas to the east of the Tone/Parrett catchment was too patchy to be totally meaningful.

We found 5 centres of current activity on the exe, 3 in North-west Somerset, 5 on the Tone, 1 on the Isle, 2 on the Parrett and one each on Kings Sedgemoor Drain, Huntspill, Brue, N.Axe and Frome. Total 21, fewer than in previous years, but the weather was against us.

Unfortunately some of the people who did come to the Victory Inn for the lunchtime meeting failed to fill in the coverage map, but just put where they had found fresh evidence. It must be stressed that only if we compare what we have found to where we looked can it be called a survey. If all we do is put down where we "bagged" a fresh spraint, then it becomes merely a field sport, not a thorough check on the health of the population.

21 elusive otters is a reassuring score, however. The anecdotal evidence from fishermen and some of our survey work this summer is that otters are less plentiful than they were two years ago. For instance, my daily checks on my otter loo for the first six months are well down on previous years. Seatrout fishers on the Taw, who fish by night, have reported very few encounters. When I did some checks to complete the National Otter Survey's white square, I got a total blank on the top of the River Otter. So we need to be vigilant.

Some of the problem must be the ongoing death rate on the roads. I have notes of 16 in the first eight months, plus two unconfirmed, which puts our 21 into a rather grim perspective. We must continue our monitoring. Somerset is a vital and sensitive area for these fragile animals, and what we do is of significance for more than this county.

I talked in the January edition of the national survey scores doubling to approximately 45%, perhaps, and pointed out that this would still mean that half of England was devoid of otter evidence. But the word is that the result is going to come out at nearer a third than a half, so two thirds of England is still otter-free. Our white square which is normally left unsurveyed in these seven-yearly checks was filled in for the first time from your records. We provided 91 records for the white square, of which 68 were positive. This fitted in pretty well with the local pattern of scores, and will serve as a good baseline for future surveys. The official results will be launched later this year, but we should be able to have a peek at some of the local scores at the next meeting.

**MINK**

We noted only one mink during the two day-event. Although they are doing alarmingly well in other parts of the country, it seems that they have almost vanished from the whole of the South-West. Please be meticulous in recording their presence. I am trying to get someone to look into this considerable crash of a widespread and successful animal.

## POST-MORTEMS

These are now back in action. The Environment Agency is to continue to fund the programme until Vic Simpson has looked at ten years' worth of dead otters, and published results. So until sometime next year we should continue to scoop up every corpse, and get them to him, unfrozen if possible, via the EA.

Interesting results continue to accumulate. The Dixon's had a five month bitch cub, which had unpleasant bite wounds, which seems a bit unnecessary considering how young it was. One that Lyn Southway collected had a liver problem which is being investigated. Karen Coxon brought in a dog from the Parrett which looked healthy apart from a host of ticks, but turned out to have died from pneumonia and pleurisy caused by a broken tooth which went badly septic. ? 100% (ok)?

## ROAD IMPROVEMENTS

The Highways Authority has had a survey done of all the bridges on the trunk roads, and is starting to put in otter ledges at the most dangerous. Sensibly they are starting in those areas where otters are expanding, so will be giving priority to the eastern end of the area. This is good news, although of course our otters have been getting flattened on ordinary roads as well. Another example of how useful our regular monitoring is.

Thanks to Russell and Sara Gomm, who got the fence repaired after we had a dog otter killed on the M5. There must have been another otter in the area to benefit from their prompt action, because the corpse turned out to have been well bitten in a fight.

## OTTER LOOS

Several people are now doing daily checks on one site. Once this has been running for a while it will provide a really sensitive check on the health of a population, and if the otters are indeed declining it will be people like Steve Powell, who has sent in a really interesting set of graphs from the Isle, who will be able to provide proof of this.

## SARANNE CESSFORD

We owe a great debt of gratitude to Saranne for all that she did for the Group. As their negotiations were at a sensitive stage she and Tony did not want it made public at the May lunch that they were going back to South Africa to live. She took with her a book of paintings of Exmoor to remind them of the five years they spent checking the rivers there. Nothing was ever too much trouble for Saranne, despite a farm, a job, lots of bee hives and several other voluntary commitments. Her up-to-date working knowledge of computers and computer mapping enabled her to present our records in the best possible ways. We shall miss her cheerful enthusiasm and wish her and Tony well in their new home.

## NEXT MEETING

*Time*  
**Monday 7 October 2002, at the Victory Inn near Norton Fitzwarren, Taunton**

A reintroduction to the Otter, which it is hoped will be of interest to our many new members, and a summary of the work and results of the Somerset Otter Group so far. Sorry for the short notice, due to holidays etc.

**Please advise our new Secretary a.s.a.p. if you require the usual Victory Inn Buffet at £5.25. - No Proforma to fill in this time!!!**

John Dixon, (

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