



SOMERSET WILDLIFE TRUST

THE OTTER GROUP

NEWSLOTTER 14

November 2002



AUTUMN MEETING – From James Williams, Group Chairman

The purpose of this meeting was to re-examine the work of the Group, and to undertake some minor reorganisations. Back to Basics: to look at who we are, what we are for and where we're at. The group in its present form started field surveys in 1993, as a continuation of work by Libby Lenton on the Levels going back to the early 1970s, which takes us back to the onset of the national crash in population, which occasioned the first National Otter Survey in 1997/98. This survey was done by Libby Lenton, and confirmed everyone's worst fears about the disappearance of the otter; only 170 sites out of 2940 checked had any sign. Since then there has been something of a comeback, which we hope is still continuing. Certainly the situation on the rivers of Somerset has improved in most areas since the start of our group ten summers ago.

So it seemed like a good time to review what we are doing, especially since the results of the 4th National Survey are becoming available and give us something to measure our efforts and results against. In general terms, it is apparent that although the national result is going to show another increase, analysis of the detail on the map, catchment by catchment, indicates that all is not yet well. Much of the apparent increase is due to infilling rather than expansion of range. And even in Somerset we still have problem areas. And a similar analysis of the distribution and effectiveness of our surveys demonstrates that our efforts are weakest at just those places where the otters are giving anxiety. So the review of our position was timely, and the ideas from the well-attended meeting will be a great help in maintaining our valuable series of records to a worthwhile standard.

The National Survey repeats at eight yearly intervals the first survey of 1997, looking at the same sites in the same way, give or take a few minor adjustments. The whole of England is covered by looking in detail at the black squares on a chessboard map of the country with 50km squares. The white squares are omitted. This means that the Exmoor end of the county has been checked in every survey, as has the area to the east and north of Glastonbury, where otters are scarce. But the 50km patch between Dunster and Wells is not looked at, officially. But our ongoing surveys have shown that this is where the main front of expansion is situated, where the action is. To the west the catchments registered percentages of 90, 89, 87, even 100 in one instance. To the east the Brue scored 29%, which is well below the national average of 36%, and neighbouring counties get 18%, 11%, and 7%. Yet the Brue catchment includes all the wardened nature reserves on the Levels, where otters should be abundant.

This year we compiled from our regular records a survey result for this important white square. 91 sites came out 75% positive, which shows the importance of this area in comparison to those further east. This is an important step forward in itself, but it is made the more significant by our results from previous years, which date the revival in this area to the early 1990s, thus indicating that there is a problem of some sort in the Brue valley which has not made similar progress; its scores for the four national surveys are 13, 6, 27, 29.

This is a good example of the value of the patient and solitary efforts of our volunteers in building up, month by month, a full picture of what is going on along our rivers. Alongside the display of the current situation of the otters we had diagrams of our recorder distribution and productivity. These showed that in common with many other groups, the foot and mouth epidemic had an effect on our volunteers. None were culled, as far as I know, but the long lay-off while the rivers were out of bounds resulted in a loss of impetus, and several of our members seem to have dropped out. The group now needs to reform, and to rejig the distribution of survey areas so as to ensure a full coverage by the New Year, when the new survey forms voted for by the meeting will come into operation. Last year 33 surveyors sent in monthly returns for 169 sites; 11 people dropped out. Unfortunately 7 of them were from the east of Bridgwater, which left us with only 4 active people in the most sensitive area. Rejigging is in progress, but we could use more volunteers out there.

A more even spread of coverage would make more sense of our annual co-ordinated survey, the Two-Day event in May. This year the result was down, partly because of the weather, and partly because of surveyor fatigue, which left important areas uncovered. But we recorded five centres of activity on the Exe and the Tone, only two on the Parrett and only one on any river to the east of that; total 21. The important question is, to what extent is this a true reflection of the state of things? There have been indications, and not just in Somerset, that there has been a downward trend in the population this year. This may be just an impression, or it may be due to the number found dead each year, mainly road casualties. In the first ten months of 2002 we recorded 27 deaths. That this is equivalent to the production of about 15 litters of cubs, in a species where the females do not breed every year, must be a considerable drawback on the rate of expansion.

Most of our corpses go to Vic Simpson for post-mortem. He is still finding evidence of fighting, some of it severe; their kidneys can have stones, and recently he has turned up a new problem in three of our otters, a problem he does not yet fully understand, associated with the gall bladder and bile ducts. This programme will close next year for consolidation and publication of the results over the last ten years, years which match the life time of this group, which has, unfortunately, provided so many of his specimens. We must keep up the sad work.

Meanwhile Karen Coxon is making quite good progress at looking at all the thirty year's accumulation of data at Somerset Environmental Records Centre. It has not been an entirely straightforward task to get it all tidied into a compatible format, but we are confident that soon results of some sort will hatch out of the computer, and we may find out what trends we have established, and get some suggestions as to the most informative way forward in our ongoing task of monitoring the well-being of these rare and fragile animals. At the very least we will have laid down a very strong baseline against which to measure any future decline. The last time, the otters had all vanished before anybody was really aware there was a problem, let alone a catastrophe. Should it happen again, we will surely be a bit more alert.

A very good tool for this sort of monitoring is to check one place daily, and express your score by days on which a new bit of evidence appeared as a percentage of the days you could check the site. Days of deep flood do not count, nor do periods of holiday. Several of our members are now doing this, and Steve Powell produced some fascinating graphs from the Isle. These indicated that for most of this year the frequency of usage was well down, but recently there had been a reassuring upsurge. My daily records on a side stream of the Tone are well down this year, but there were no fewer than 6 known deaths in these two parishes last