



SOMERSET WILDLIFE TRUST

THE OTTER GROUP

NEWSLOTTER 15
March 2003



NOTES FROM THE CHAIRMAN— From James Williams, Group Chairman

My sadness at having to miss the group's spring meeting for a trip to Peru was somewhat assuaged when I had a good view of a group of 7 giant Otters fishing. And I finally cheered up completely when we watched one of the little coastal Marine Otters diving among the surging turmoil of the Pacific surf. We also went to look for their third species, the Neotropical River Otter, but a storm away in the high Andes had raised the main river so much that its level was well above that of the side stream, which was in reverse flow. So the boatman rightly said we would never make it, and turned back. All very different from plodding in my wellies through the nettles along the Tone.

But the otter enthusiasts out there have much the same preoccupations as we do. They are concerned about population levels, high mortality, pollution, reduction of habitat, etc. They endeavour to record the fluctuating fortunes of their otters in a very similar way.

The results of the 4th National Survey are to be published soon, with another encouraging increase for the whole country, from 21% to 35%. This is still not very high, a 65% negative result. The interest for our group will be in the detail, which shows scores of nearly 100% for the Exmoor end, and a steady decline across our area to 29% for the Brue, (and 7% for the Bristol Avon.)

Ours is still an area of great sensitivity and significance for the recovery of the Otter, and we must keep up our excellent efforts as a matter of national conservation importance. James.

SPRING MEETING - From John Dixon, Group Secretary

James had sent his formal apologies for absence although I had to tell the meeting that in all honesty he had not sounded in the least bit apologetic at accepting a chance to visit Peru, at short notice, to see giant and sea otters.

There have been 9* otter road deaths so far this year, 2 on the Tone, 1 each on the Parrett/Cam and Parrett/Yeo, Brue, Axe and Avill (following 1 at the very end of last year) and one at Goathurst, on the Quantocks. Just over the border there was another death on the Mole/Taw. (* update to 31 March = 14)

Many thanks to Margaret Palmer and Anne Robinson, who are standing down, for much valuable work in the past, and to Julie Parker for covering Francis Laver's patch while he is incapacitated; get well soon Francis.

Welcome to Gillian Coles who is taking over from Anne under the guidance of Steve Powell. Welcome to several other new members, including Martin and Jill Southwood who will be monitoring the stretch of the Doniford River not already covered.

We do still need many more people on the ground. Written appeals will be published in appropriate newsletters etc. but there is nothing like face to face recruitment. The problem is that potential volunteers may be hesitant at putting their names forward for what they perceive as a highly scientific project being undertaken by a cliquish band of elitist boffins! We have to persuade them that we are a friendly, fun loving bunch and that the only prerequisite is that they must enjoy scrambling around on river banks in the rain poking pooh!

It was felt the time was ripe for another "Training Day". (*see item below*)

Vic Simpson is funded to the end of 2003 only, but is anxious to receive as many corpses as possible for post mortem meanwhile. Ideally corpses should be chilled NOT frozen – and definitely not 'stewing'. The Environment Agency has the system for getting corpses to Vic, and will collect, but it is better to deliver to the EA in Exeter or Bridgwater if you can, to speed the process. Vic then has a further six months funding to write up his research.

DNA testing is still very much in the melting pot, although there was a sense of optimism in the air at a recent conference attended by Karen.

The concensus of the Meeting was that the Autumn Meeting should be around the end of September/early October. Details will be in the next Newsletter to be published after the 2 Day Event.

The formal part of the meeting concluded with questions and observations from the floor. Points of wider interest were:-

1. It was confirmed that where circumstances made it necessary or desirable recorders could change the site they monitored; provided they noted the details on their Survey Forms.
2. Ian Anderson, who has observed and photographed otters in Scotland, said that otters could climb trees and fences, so otter fencing was no deterrent to nor protection for otters. Margaret Davis cited a recent case where a wild female had climbed into an enclosure containing 2 captive bred males, at the Buckfastleigh sanctuary beside the River Dart.
3. Survey Forms – see separate item.

After supper Charlie Hamilton-James gave us a fascinating insight into how he made his acclaimed film. We had seen the preview, most of us have now seen the finished film and now we know all the trade secrets! Far from detracting from the film knowledge that a sequence was in fact filmed over five nights and the usable bits edited into one apparently continuous bit of activity merely emphasised the skill and dedication required of Charlie and his assistant in capturing such a remarkable record of otter behaviour. It was also heartening to know that despite all the modern technology available Charlie still had to resort to building contraptions reminiscent of Heath Robinson or Roland Emmet in order to get some of the shots he wanted. The picture of Charlie and Assistant snatching a quick snack in the early hours of one morning, having lost track of their quarry, only to realise they were being watched from the bushes by four pairs of ottery eyes, is one that should have been on film. We are indeed lucky as a Group to have the support and friendship of Charlie, to whom we extend many thanks for dashing back from a meeting in London to give us such a super talk.

SURVEY FORMS from John Dixon, Group Secretary

Some initial teething problems were ironed out at the Meeting and generally the new forms have been well received.

Geoff Allen has scanned a form into a user friendly format and will email a copy to anyone who would like one. Email him at Geoff.Allen@southsomerset.gov.uk.

In future forms should be returned **Quarterly** direct to SERC,
This will provide continuity should Karen no longer be able to continue with the chore of transferring all the information into the computer and cover changes of Secretary etc. (opportunity here for a reminder that I have almost completed the first year of my two year stint in that position.)

Many thanks to Bill Butcher, Director of SERC, for allowing this.

THE TWO DAY EVENT 10/11 MAY 2003

For the benefit of our new members it might be helpful to run through the details again, as this is the one chance each year to do anything approaching a realistic count.

It is important that everyone takes part if they possibly can. If you cannot make the actual dates, please do your own 2 Day Survey as close to 10/11 May as you can manage, or get someone else to cover for you.

On Day 1 survey all your key sites and remove all evidence. On Day 2 resurvey those sites. Thus any evidence found on Day 2 must have appeared overnight, so giving a clear snapshot of what was where that night.

Then, if possible, hot foot it to Stoford Manor to hand in your forms and mark up the maps. Otherwise post your forms in a.s.a.p., please.

As it has not been possible to find a suitable pub type venue James has kindly agreed to host the event at his home. So it will be a running "bring your own food and wine etc." lunch with tea and coffee and 'usual facilities' provided. If it's fine it will be a picnic, otherwise indoors. There is no need to say in advance if you are coming. Arrive when you can and stay as long as you like – a sort of 12 noonish to around teatime informal and sociable afternoon.

Stoford Manor is at Grid Ref: ST 180218. From Junction 26 on the M5 take the slip road for ¼ mile to a roundabout, turn right onto the A38 following the signs to Taunton. After another 1¼ miles, turn right signed West Buckland. After 350 yards take the first left and then after another 1/3 mile turn left into the drive to Stoford Manor.

TRAINING EVENING – 8th June 2003

Meet at 4 p.m. at the Willows Café at the Peat Moors Visitor Centre near Westhay. (Grid Ref: ST 428415). Usual outdoor clothing suitable for the weather, and be prepared for some muddy walking. James intends to stay on for some 'otter spotting' at dusk, and all are welcome to keep him company. If we can have eyes in more than one hide at the same time we can get a good idea of how many otters are about. However, feel free to leave after the 'formal instruction', which will take a couple of hours.