



SOMERSET WILDLIFE TRUST

THE OTTER GROUP

NEWSLOTTER 16
September 2003



From the Chairman: James Williams

TWO-DAY EVENT

Thirty-three members and eight trainees from SERC took part in this year's Two-day Event. Unfortunately there seemed to be a cluster effect on our distribution, so some of the gaps were rather large. However the survey turned up some reassuring records, and for the first time ever an otter was sighted. Kathryn Kist, a new member, came across one, or it came across her, at Chilton Trinity, near Bridgwater. This was not far from where Tony Robinson had almost been the first to see an otter on the event, but sadly his was a road casualty on the A38. 26 otters provided fresh evidence on the second day, and 14 people had fresh evidence on the first day. Depending on how far these 14 otters wandered, some of them could well have been overlaps with the results of day 2, but it seems we were in contact with at least 30 otters. The only regret is that some of the major gaps in our coverage were where we most need the information from, especially the Brue.

OTTER WALK

A dozen or so members went for an otter walk along the south Drain in the core area of the Brue Valley in June, but sadly there was no recent otter evidence at all. Karen Coxon, James Williams and Sue Farrington had spent the whole of that day checking sites in the rest of the valley, and all that effort turned up evidence of two otters at most. No doubt there were others lurking somewhere, but even so it was a worrying result. Next year we must make every effort to have the Brue properly surveyed at the Two-day Event.

RECORDS AT SERC

Thirty-one people are down as having sent in records to SERC so far this year. This is fewer than we used to have before foot and mouth caused a long break in our activities.

Karen Coxon is still busily analysing all these results, (1977 of them in the year 2000!), and hopes to have some maps to display at the October meeting.

OTTERS AND MINK

Several of the principal otter biologists are coming out in support of the theory that otters and mink do not co-exist. There is a lot of doubt over the exact mechanism, but it does seem that mink decline in many of the areas where otters prosper. They may just, wisely, clear off, they may be unable to breed in peace with such muscular neighbours, they may even be killed by their larger (up to ten times) cousins.

What do we think? There was undoubtedly formerly a very strong population of mink in this county; keepers' records, trapping bags, the mink hunt, all agreed that there were lots of mink. Now most of these groups agree that there is scarcely a problem. SERC is reporting a small but significant presence of water voles, which are normally totally zapped by mink in a very short time, according to Wildcru at Oxford University. And out on the Levels, where the 4th National Otter Survey confirmed our anxiety about the diminished otter presence, mink have been trapped in profusion by the bird wardens and BASC. However, on the Tone, where otters seem plentiful, I have not heard of a single mink recently, not even at the pheasant pens.

Can we throw any light on this phenomenon by our recording? Vic Simpson has recorded bite marks on a few corpses which were too small to have been made by another otter, and were probably mink bites. If mink are scarce or absent where otters prosper, can we assume the reverse, that plentiful mink denotes absence of otters? If so, that is another pointer towards a real otter problem on the Brue.

BIRTHS AND DEATHS

Seventeen corpses to the 10th May. It looked as if we were in for a very gloomy year, but since then there has only been one in our area, and a couple off the Exe. Is this let-up just a function of the dry spell and the low flows? If so, it would follow that the recent bites on 47% of the otters post-mortemed by Vic Simpson are only incidental to their deaths, even the very septic ones. If every other otter has recently been wounded in a punch-up with one of its fellows, what happens to them in a dry time? Are we missing several corpses in the long vegetation? Another area where more research is needed, and keep the corpses coming in, please.

Births are less well recorded, for obvious reasons, but 10 records so far is good for a dry year, and sufficiently reassuring that the background pollutants are not sterilising the whole population. However, the total of cubs recorded is only 15, fewer than the deaths.

POLLUTIONS

Ongoing damage to tributaries of the Axe(S) and the Tone are all that has been noted, but I expect there are more. We must be vigilant, and report everything to : the EA will react very positively. That it matters can be seen from the scores from the Stoford Otter Loo, on a side stream of the Tone.. In 1999 there was fresh evidence on 14% percent of the days it was checked, in 2000 17%, in 2001 18%, and in the first half of 2003 15%. But 2002 slumped to 10%, entirely as a result of a severe dose of farm slurry inflicted on it by a slob in August. The otters stayed away until after the winter rains had cleansed it properly.

SURVEYS

Government money has recently been made available to prevent road casualties, mainly on trunk roads. Some interesting findings have emerged in connection with this work. A day spent looking at the bridges on A303 resulted in a ledge being installed on the Parrett; we surprised Steve Powell and his father repairing the otter steps up the steep weir at Ilminster. More recently James Williams has been able to look at every bridge from Clevedon to Devon along the M5. Although the main aim was to assess the danger quotient of the constructions, and to suggest possible mitigations, it also amounted to a linear transect across all the Somerset rivers, a brilliant opportunity for a snapshot survey. Results in our next issue. But fascinatingly, on two major streams only a short field apart, one had six spraints and no mink scats, while the other had only mink scats and no otter evidence at all; how tactful.

Much engineering is planned for the North-west of Taunton in the near future. The SERC trainees' ongoing assessment of the usage of the town itself will provide a brilliant baseline against which we will be able to measure the disturbance from the construction of the new Tone Bridge. We will also be able to monitor the effect of the construction of the park and ride at Silk Mills; our records have already influenced the design to be more favourable to the otters, and other wildlife, on the Back Stream.

We were asked also to comment on the reactivation of eleven water mills in south Somerset as hydro-electricity generators. This gave another snapshot survey of otter distribution and habitat usage. And led in one instance to some interesting conversation about which window was the best to watch the otters from! Answer, the upstairs lavatory. Surely it ought to be renamed the "Otter Loo".

From the Secretary; John Dixon (

NEW MEMBERS

James has written about the gaps in our coverage of Somerset. I always feel the best way to recruit new members is by personal contact, so, if you know anyone you think might be enthused by the thought of "Pooh Sniffing", why not take them along with you when next you monitor your patch and bring them to the next meeting (details overleaf).

SUCCESSION

As most of you know, I took over as Secretary in a bit of a rush when Saranne 'retired' home to South Africa -- on the strict promise I would only have to be in office for two years. Well, we are now well into the second year! I am also very conscious that the Group would benefit from someone a bit more methodical and pro-active than I am. So if anyone out there would like to help, just let me know and we can start planning a handover.

LICENCES

Following repeated approaches to English Nature they have finally written saying that they are reviewing the requirements for Otter Licences. They say we do not need a Licence under their interpretation of the current rules; and it looks as if we will not require one in future either; but they will let us know if this changes.

NEXT MEETING

Monday 13th October, 7.30pm, at the Victory Inn. As usual a Buffet Supper will be provided for those who require it -- cost £5.75 per head. It would be very helpful if you could have the right money available when we collect it. to minimise disturbance during the meeting. Please return the Proforma below to:- James Williams, because I will be unable to attend myself (Otter watching in Scotland!)

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To: James Williams, 6

Otter Group Meeting

Please order me.....Buffet Suppers at £5.75 each. (Pay on the day)

Name:.....Contact Telephone Number.....

Names of Guests, if any