



SOMERSET WILDLIFE TRUST

THE OTTER GROUP

NEWSLOTTER 17
January 2004



FROM: THE CHAIRMAN

NEXT MEETING

This has been fixed for Monday 16th February, at 7.30 pm at the Victory Inn, near Norton Fitzwarren. There will again be a charge of £5 to cover the room and the buffet. The "entertainment" part of the evening will take the form of members' contributions, snaps, slides, videos, holiday stories, otter sightings, etc. It would be especially interesting if we could compile a collection of impressions of the effect of last summer's drought on your patch.

TWO-DAY EVENT

We have booked this venue also for the results meeting after the Two-Day Event, which will be rather earlier this year, on 24th and 25th April. As well as the serious business of compiling the results of this, our main survey of the year, there will as usual be a lunchtime social event, with a Ploughman's Lunch. All welcome; there is a children's playground and nice outside tables if it is fine, as it traditionally is for this event.

SURVEY RETURNS

PLEASE COULD YOU ALL MAKE A MAJOR EFFORT TO GET THE FIRST QUARTER'S RESULTS IN VERY PROMPTLY, so that the new secretarial team can work out who is still with us before the Two-Day event? There was quite a long discussion at the November meeting about this, why those who hadn't come had not, and what we could do to make things more attractive to them, such as moving the meetings about a bit. Feedback on this would be very welcome; just lift the phone if you cannot come, and "give your apologies", so that we can assess the true extent of our active membership.

Prompt returns make life much easier for Karen and SERC, and would give us a chance of some better feedback to you all. We are hoping to present the results either on a chart, as Simon Reece does for the Avon, or as a map, as they do in Devon and Dorset. At the Two-Day Event we shall also be asking for any news of mink and/or water voles, species we ought always to make a note of. And as always we need proper records of negative searches: that is after all one of the main purposes of all this activity by you all, to become aware of any serious absence/lack /decline of otters as soon as possible, and to be in a position to do something about it.

One of the best and most sensitive tools for this is of course a series of daily records at an Otter Loo. Could all those who keep such a valuable series of readings please work out the results(days checked, number of days used, number of spraints deposited), and the all important annual percentage score of days used over days monitored. Could you do one copy to SERC and one to me, please?

Another valuable spin off from the Two-Day event is that it shows us the areas we have not managed to cover. But as prevention is better than cure can we all please try not to leave any gaps, especially in the eastern half of the county, and the Brue Valley. This is something that could occupy part of the February meeting. Perhaps we could have a Brue Only weekend in March, as a sort of rehearsal for the big event, and using some extra people who will be occupied elsewhere in April, to give the whole system a most thorough examination. That catchment has been giving cause for concern, even alarm, for some time. It came out very weakly in the 4th National survey, and last summer we failed to find any evidence at all on two occasions. But in November a small party of us had 8 fresh records in one day, which had to be, we thought, the work of at least 6 otters. So what is going on in this mysterious and swampy valley? Let's try to arrange to give it a thorough examination on two occasions this spring, if only to set our minds at rest. This is where the Somerset otter records were first started, by Libby Lenton, and the present otter group was set up to continue the valuable and unique series of records that she began.

There are plans afoot to try to give the R. Axe (S coast) a similar complete examination. This involves coordination of surveyors from the three counties involved, Devon, Dorset and Somerset. This too may be arranged for March; further details at the meeting, and extra helpers welcome.

ADMIN OF THE OTTER GROUP.

I have come to realise that the group is now so large, and the county so long from east to west, that it is in fact too unwieldy for one person to co-ordinate. So I propose to set up a series of more local sub-groups by catchments, leaving the detail of division of territory up to the people in that area, and to put new members in touch with experienced people who are local to them. I hope this can be talked about at the spring meeting.

As indicated earlier, John Dixon is to stand down after nearly three years of valuable service and support to the group. Patrick McCormack will take on as membership secretary, and Steve Powell is to help Karen with the records.

DOUG WOODS

Although best known recently for his pioneering work on the Dormouse, Doug was in fact a widely knowledgeable naturalist across a broad spectrum of species and habitats. This group owes him a great debt, because it was mainly due to him that the small number of interested people was pulled together to continue the series of records from the Levels area of the Brue catchment. These surveys were begun in the 70's by a concerned teacher, Libby Lenton, and thanks to the prompt action by Doug, Cle Boyd and others to ensure their continuance, now form an unrivalled set of data, a very valuable archive.

Doug was always very pleased at the way the group has expanded, and brought in new people into the world of practical conservation surveying. Although immensely knowledgeable, Doug always had time for beginners and novices, and was an excellent guide and teacher.

ROAD CASUALTIES

I have a record of 28 dead otters for 2003. If the theory that wet weather forces more otters onto the roads is valid, this is a terribly high total for such a dry year. Nearly all of them were run over on the roads. Is this an indication of that being the most probable death of a 21st century otter? Or is it merely that we are more likely to discover the ones that get flattened by cars? In which case we are recording unnatural deaths, but missing most of the natural ones, perhaps. 9 at least of the 28, ie 30%, never made it into the post-mortem scheme. By catchments, the worst hit rivers were the Tone 7, the Parrett 6, the Brue 4, and the Avill 2. Does this reflect the density of cars or the size of the otter population?

Two members recently repaired the reflectors at East Lyng. A map of the Othery Black Spot was submitted to the EA with the otters' path clearly marked, and a suggestion for an inexpensive mitigation

POST-MORTEMS

The post-mortem scheme has been extended , so keep on collecting corpses, but try NOT to freeze them unless it is essential. And inform James Williams on 01823 461655, not the Bridgwater EA, as they have ceased collecting and delivering the bodies. Vic Simpson is starting his writing up of all the results, but still needs good or interesting corpses. (but not over-ripe fragments or unrecognisable lumps of meat.)

The EA has come to realise that these dead otters are a valuable indicator of the levels of pollutants in the water systems, and is in the process of transferring the programme from research into a part of their ongoing mainstream chemical monitoring .There are procedural and practical difficulties to iron out, but meanwhile the work will be continuing, so please exert every effort to get all otters into the system.

FISH FARMS AND FISHING LAKES

There have again been quite a number of worried phone calls from people who are losing fish to either mink or otters. The Water for Wildlife team at RSNC are on the case, and advice is available on how to fence adequately against otters, and how best to trap mink. Carp, which are especially valuable, are at the northern limit of their range hereabouts, and would really prefer warmer water. This makes them torpid in cold weather, and easy to catch, especially in shallow waters.

ENGINEERING AND DISTURBANCE.

When there were major repair works to the M5 bridge over the river Tone, Russell and Sara Gomm were able to keep a watchful eye on proceedings, and to demonstrate that with a few sensible precautions, the otters were able to continue their lives as normal despite all the work. Now there is another chance to do some work on this sort of thing. Work on the new Park & Ride, and the long-awaited Railway Bridge outside Taunton, begins in June 04, and I have committed the group to a monitoring role. This could be very interesting, and would make a good paper if written up properly. Is anybody interested in helping with this? Basic monitoring work needs to start at once, to establish some norms before the works begin.

POLLUTION

Another potentially damaging assault on my stream, this time an accidental discharge of milk. Fortunately the water flow was sufficiently high to dilute it considerably, and the Environment Agency were quickly and energetically on the case. The tiny trout in our egg hatching box seemed to weather the problem, and the otter has been back twice since, so perhaps all is well.

M5 BRIDGES CHECK.

As part of the work WS Atkins are doing on preventing otter deaths on trunk roads, we examined all the M5 bridges between Clevedon and the Devon Border. 29 bridges were looked at; 4 had no feature to attract otter evidence; 18 of the other 25 (72%) were positive. There was evidence of mink at 4 bridges, all of them north of the Polden Ridge.

P.T.O.

FROM: THE SECRETARY

CHANGES IN SECRETARIAL ARRANGEMENTS

This should be the last Newsletter in which you have to put up with notes from me. When I took over from Saranne it was really a stop-gap arrangement as I have neither the secretarial skills nor right mind-set to do a good job. I have been very conscious since then how brilliant at the job Saranne was and that my own efforts were not serving the Group as well as the Group, and our Otters, deserved.

We hope to introduce your new Secretary at the meeting on 16 February, and contact details will be circulated in the next Neslotter.

RETURN OF SURVEY FORMS

Your monthly Survey Forms should continue to be sent direct to SERC at the end of each Quarter. The forms you have at the moment have SERC's old address on them. Please ensure you put the new address on the envelope though!

Karen Coxon, *[faded text]*

I hope to have some new survey forms ready for the next meeting and they will show the new address

TWO DAY EVENT

Enclosed is a Survey Form for this event. I think the notes on the form should be sufficient but if there is anything you are not sure about give me a ring on 01643 703654. You could eMail me but Minehead is about to go onto Broadband and I do not have sufficient faith in the system to believe there will not be some teething problems!

I did not have room to squeeze the following onto the form. If you need to do your two day survey on days other than the 24th and 25th of April please put the actual dates at the top of the columns headed Day1 and Day2 – otherwise it will be assumed that those were the dates on which you did your survey.

To John Dixon, Cc *[faded text]*

Please book me in for the Meeting at the Victory Inn on 16th February 2004
or
Please give my apologies to the meeting.

(please delete whichever of the above alternatives that does not apply)

Name :..... Telephone:.....

Survey catchment:.....