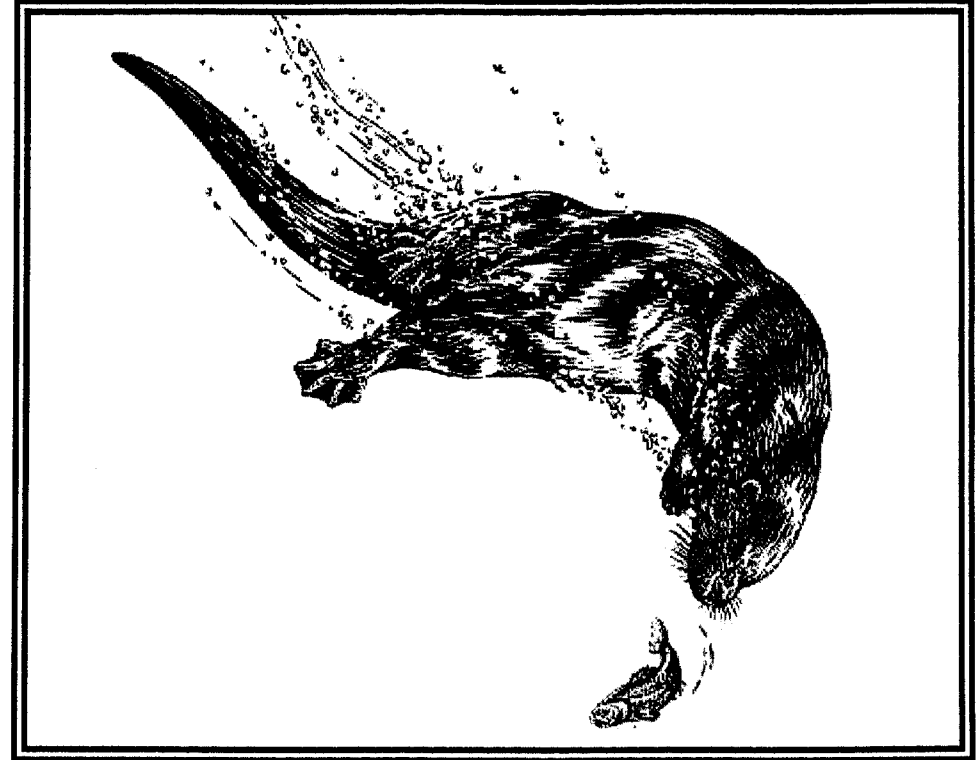




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Somerset Wildlife Trust Otter Group

NEWSLOTTER 18

MARCH 2004



Officers

Chairman:

James Williams

Membership Secretary:

Patrick McCormack

Newsletter Editor & Administration:

John Dixon

Recorder (all Survey Forms):

Karen Coxon

ENVIRONMENT AGENCY
Emergency 'Out of hours' contacts:

EDITORIAL

Dear Member -

Welcome to the 'New Look' Newsletter - I hope you approve.

Please do send in the Form at the back of the Newsletter. Just as it is difficult to know whether there are any otters about when no returns are sent in, so it is difficult to be sure which members are active when we don't hear from them!

Feedback on what you think of the new format would be helpful. You can use the back of the return form for this.

Best Wishes

John

2004 PROGRAMME

- Now!** Results for the First Quarter to be sent Karen Coxon at SERC, please, if not already sent. If anyone is not operating to the traditional 3 monthly 'Quarters' will they please change now.
- Now!** Please complete and return to John Dixon the Form at the back of this Newsletter so that we know what cover we need to provide for absentees during the Two Day Event.
- 24/25 April** **TWO DAY EVENT** Use Special Form, copy enclosed, and return this at the lunch meeting at the Victory Inn on 25 April. If unable to attend please post your Form to James Williams.
- TBA** Axe Sweep
- TBA** 'Get Together' for the Far East (of Somerset, that is)
- TBA** Brue 'Hide and Seek' Evening

NOTES:

1. Please use the Saturday results from the Two Day Event as your April results for your Second Quarter Returns.
2. Two Day Event results for the Brue will also be incorporated into the Brue Investigation.
3. Addresses are on the front cover of this Newsletter.

FEBRUARY MEMBERS' EVENING

Who's doing what

A total of 35 members attended, and there were apologies from several who could not make it; this has helped in the re-organisation of the members lists enormously. Patrick McCormack has undertaken this daunting task with much enthusiasm and considerable computer dexterity. Already things are looking more streamlined and efficient and it should help tremendously with getting a full cover for the Two Day Event. It was good to see some newcomers. I hope they won't feel that they have not had much notice taken of them since, and I assure them they will soon be in full action for the big search. Patrick is to cover the membership, and the sites and vacant patches; this will mean he liaises with Karen Coxon over the results. She is to be assisted where necessary by Steve Powell. Meanwhile John Dixon will be editing the Newsletters and running the meetings etc., as before. James Williams will give all these hard working people cheerful encouragement.

Local Groups

Several things were agreed upon at the meeting. Members thought it would be helpful to have more local co-ordination of patches, and to this end local 'sub-groups' are to be set up, so that people can get in touch with their neighbours on the rivers, and use their local knowledge to rationalise the patches. This will also make it much easier to introduce new members onto the river banks. In addition to the all-important annual 2 Day Event, it was decided to have a major look at the Brue catchment, on 21st March, and to try to set up a coordinated search of the south coast Axe, which runs through three counties, so is getting very fragmented attention. David Evans is dealing with this.

Brue Survey

James Williams is going to repeat the eastern end of the National Otter Survey in the spring. This fits onto the end of the Brue catchment, of course, and by looking at this whole area in detail it should be possible to redefine the boundary of the spread of the otters. The results from the 4th National Survey in 2001 showed a sharp decline in the results, which started with the Brue, and was even worse further east. But the surveying of this important boundary area was severely hampered by foot & mouth disease, so it seems like a good idea to do it again, properly. In connection with this there is to be a meeting/ pub lunch/ training walk for those of you from the eastern end of the county, date to be decided.

Central Taunton

In addition to their ongoing check on the centre of Taunton, Peter Dawson and the SERC trainees have taken on the task of monitoring the effect of the engineering work for the new Railway crossing and the Park & Ride. They are establishing a baseline of normal usage before the machines move in late in the summer. You will remember that Russell and Sara Gomm did a similar job at the other end of Taunton, when the M5 bridge was strengthened. They were able to give advice

that kept the disturbance to a minimum, and the otters carried on about their lives much as normal.

Points of interest

As usual, members brought up several interesting conundrums. Anal Jelly, and what is its significance, frequency or purpose. Is it voluntary, or just a necessary excretion? Simon Reece had found what appeared to be worms in a spraint. Is this common? In view of the results of a recent post-mortem case from the bottom of the Tone, we should be vigilant for this, and collect the evidence for Vic Simpson where possible.

A recent vast report from the Vincent Wildlife Trust holds that it is aggression and murder by the otters that has depressed the mink population so considerably since about 1990. Yet they have been trapping dozens out on the Somerset Levels. All our surveyors should keep a careful record of any mink evidence, please. There is still a lurking anxiety of two probable cases of Aleutians Disease in otters, an infection which could only have come from released mink.

Otter Loos

The results from those of you who are doing daily recording at an 'Otter Loo' are beginning to produce very interesting results, and we now have nearly enough to be worth a detailed analysis. This is surely the meaningful way forward, in the absence of the DNA monitoring. (There is still a lot of talk and research going on behind the scenes with a view to getting this valuable tool restarted, by no signs of a date yet).

Daily recording sounds daunting and onerous, but it isn't. All you have to do is to stick your head over, or under, a bridge whenever you are passing, and record days you looked and whether positive or negative. If the stone was under water, or you were away, that is a non-day. So for each period one can calculate the percentage of the days when you looked that were positive. What percentage of the times that you went there did an otter go there? That this will register any trends was shown by the drop in results after the stream by James Williams' bridge was killed out by farm slurry. In addition, if you have the luxury of mud, you can discover how often an otter sneaks past without registering a spraint. This has a bearing on the whole of the group's activities, of course.

Member Contributions

But the best part of the evening was the members' contributions. John and Janet Dixon gave a presentation on their study of the little River Avill on Exmoor. It was an example of what can be achieved by persistence. They have recorded (too many) deaths, and as a result have been able to influence some mitigations; they have shown that despite regular litters of cubs their river is not a discrete population, but must rely to some extent on immigrants.

Following them we had home movies. James Williams showed three species of otter he had encountered abroad. Steve Powell showed some of the unfortunate

MISSION STATEMENT

We have had so many new recruits recently that the question has arisen, 'what exactly is the Somerset Otter Group, and what is it trying to do?'

It was originally founded to see if there were any otters left after the major decline to near extinction. But happily the goal posts have moved quite a lot since the mid 1980's, so it seemed like a good idea to attempt an answer.

What do you think of the following Draft? Feedback and ideas, please, to James.

SOMERSET OTTER GROUP - AIMS & OBJECTIVES

1. **to carry out regular, systematic surveys of the otter in Somerset, and to continue the long series of records for this county, especially the records for the Brue valley started in the 1970's by Libby Lenton, so that any reversal in the fortunes of this important and scarce indicator species may be quickly noticed and acted upon.**
To this end, the survey results are to be collated, examined and analysed at SERC, and an outline of them to be fed back to the network of members.
2. **to establish a network of surveyors, and to train and allocate new recruits, so that objective 1 can be achieved.**
3. **to support conservation initiatives and research projects to do with otters, and associated species. Recent examples include:**
 - the EA's post-mortem programme
 - the DNA monitoring study
 - the national otter surveys
 - SAC monitoring / Natura 2000
 - Highways Authority, trunk roads and wildlife
4. **to advise on problems associated with the presence of otters. Examples include:**
 - various riverside engineering projects
 - black spots for otter deaths on roads
 - protection of fish ponds and fisheries
 - potentially damaging planning applications
5. **to promote awareness and appreciation of otters, so that the county's increasing otter population may be regarded as a benefit and an asset to be cherished.**

OTTER DEATHS

It has been rather a quiet start to the year, probably because of the low rainfall. Otters probably go on the roads rather less when the rivers are low, but I do not suppose they fight any less often or less vigorously. As nearly 50% of Vic Simpson's post-mortems reveal evidence of fighting, what happens to the injured otters at a dry time?

That they are about is shown by the discovery at Stoke St Gregory of an emaciated, sick and bitten otter, so ill that the RSPCA vets had to put it down. But where are the others?

Good news that the post-mortem programme is to be continued in such a way that all viable otters will be looked at, and Vic is to be given such assistance as is needful to enable him to write up the results so far in a thorough report. All corpses in a reasonable state to James Williams on 01823 461655, fresh if possible, but obviously some may have to be frozen if it is a Bank Holiday and hot.

Only seven deaths so far this year, up to the equinox, or eight if you count the skeleton discovered in a rough corner of a garden when the vegetation died down. Five, including the Hillfarrance Brook's skeleton, come from the Tone catchment.

BRUE SWEEP- DAY ONE

On 21st March 19 members of the group saturated the whole of the Brue catchment for a very busy morning. Over 70 sites were checked for evidence of otter and mink; this gives the sort of degree of coverage that is recommended in the recently published Natura 2000 booklet, *Monitoring The Otter*, as the method to be employed throughout Europe on designated river systems, such as SAC's (Special Areas of Conservation.)

Although the Brue is not so designated, so much of this valley is under protection of one type or another that it must come to more or less the same thing. Therefore to use the method must be appropriate, and will enable accurate comparison to be made with other rivers. And as the booklet came out only on 20th February, it may well be that the Somerset Otter Group has scored a European first.

The full result will emerge after the exercise has been repeated as part of the Two Day Event, but the initial impressions are encouraging, as very fresh evidence was found by at least 7 of the teams. These need to be looked at closely on the map to ascertain just how many different patches with current otters this represents, but the answer is going to be a reassuring "several."

However the limitations of applying our normal method to such a complex system of interconnected waterways, rhynes and swamps, was highlighted the next evening, when James Williams encountered four different otters in an area where we had recorded only a modest amount of evidence. Three together, all of a similar, modest size, and then separately, a larger solo one: a Daddy otter, a Mummy otter, and two Baby otters? Aaah! But whatever they were, their evidence was largely hidden away in the reed beds. Which is why we need to have three days in the area before producing a result.

An alternative, and fun method of checking out these elusive creatures might be a game of Brue 'Hide & Seek'. Perhaps the Brue valley members, and others, might like to arrange an evening when we put an observer or two in every bird hide on the central levels, and on some of the bridges too, perhaps, and see what we can

spot at dusk, with a boasting session in the pub afterwards. Those who think this is worth considering could give it joint consideration at the Two-Day Event pub lunch, perhaps.

James Williams

FROM OUR MOTORING CORRESPONDENT:

'WHEN IS AN OTTER LIKE A FORD CORTINA?'

Back in the early 1980's, a mate of mine once bought a bright orange Mark 4 Ford Cortina. Well, it was the early 1980's! I had never noticed an orange one before, but then after he got his, suddenly I kept seeing them all over the place. In fact, I could hardly believe I hadn't noticed them before.

Many years on, we have ended up living right next to the River Parrett. One evening in early spring two years ago we heard a series of piercing whistles coming from the river. Intrigued, we went to the window overlooking the river but it was too dark to see anything. A few evenings later, the same thing happened and, lo and behold, on craning for a view into the weirpool, there was an otter making its way downstream. To say we were excited is an understatement! On other evenings and mornings, a chance glance out of the window (or dash, in the case of hearing a whistle) was surprisingly often rewarded with a view of an otter fishing. Quite early on, a pair of cubs appeared following their mother. During periods of high water they could be heard calling frantically in the dark, as mother led them out of the river and round the weirpool.

Which brings me back to orange Cortinas. On searching the riverbank after early sightings, the signs of spraint, footprints, slides and left-over meals were all too apparent. The places they left the water and flattened the long grass on the way to their re-entry point the other side of the weir were so obvious it was funny to think we had never noticed it before. In fact, the 'otter path' was actually better established than the path made by walkers. The places they sprainted also fell into a pattern, meaning after a while we only really looked carefully at the sort of places we expected to find spraint, and were amazed how often it was found.

On walks away from 'our' river, we started to notice the familiar signs elsewhere - broken freshwater mussel shells beside a river, spraint on a rock on a Cornish coastal footpath near a wetland, an 'otter path' round an obstruction; we became unable to resist looking under bridges on unfamiliar rivers for the tell-tale signs.

We still get a thrill out of seeing otter signs anywhere, and it does make you wonder how many other elusive species of wildlife leave all the clues you could want, if you could only recognise them for what they are. Having trained to watch for otter signs has meant our walks now include a heightened appreciation of the tracks and signs we previously would have overlooked. For all that, I'm not that sorry to miss seeing bright orange Cortinas.

Pat Lehain & Serena de la Hey

GETTING MORE FROM YOUR OTTER RECORDING

John and I have been recording for five years now but we still consider ourselves beginners. There is so much to learn about the elusive otter.

There has been a lot of secrecy about otters in the past and if you saw one you kept quiet. If you know the nest site of a rare bird you have a good chance of seeing that bird. But otters are liable to pop up anywhere and at any time. Unless you are Charlie Hamilton-James you are not likely to be in the right place at the right time. If otters are seen on your river system you want to know because it helps put pieces into the jigsaw.

With this in mind I talk to everyone I meet who is out and about the area regularly. I am thus becoming known in our area as 'the otter lady', either politely or impolitely depending on the viewpoint of the individual. That aside, my notoriety is producing results as I often get reports of sightings. These are always followed up and another person or organisation is added to my Friends of the Otter list. Apart from interested individuals the Exmoor National Park Rangers, Police, Environment Agency, Forest Enterprise, Minehead Golf Club, Dunster Beach Holidays and the Hunt all report sightings or corpses. I log these with as much information as I can get so that I can match them to our recording evidence.

Over the years, after each recording session, I have scratched my head and tried to make sense of the evidence. To make it easier to see at a glance what the otters are up to I produced a master spread sheet.

| | Jan | Feb | Mar | Apr | May | Jun | Jul | Aug | Sep | Oct | Nov | Dec |
|-------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| Weather | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Water Level | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Site 1 | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Site 2 | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Site 3 | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Site 4 | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Site 5 | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Site 6 | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Site 7 | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Site 8 | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Site 9 | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Site 10 | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Site 11 | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Site 12 | | | | | | | | | | | | |

In this example the shade of grey represents the intensity of the results recorded

I list the sites from source to sea. Then each month I plot all the evidence using different coloured dots for fresh, recent and old spraints. For anal jelly I use another colour dot circled by whichever of my 'spraint colours' indicates the age. Padding is rare on our rocky river so is omitted, but I include reported sightings.

This sheet gives me an instant visual insight into the centres of activity and from these I try to deduce what our otter or otters are doing. For example, if there are two centres of activity with a large gap in between it would be reasonable to suppose there are two otters.

Spraint at the extremities could mean that a dog otter is on the river marking his territory. If we find very little evidence for several months and then, all of a sudden, there is a lot of it, this could mean that a bitch otter was off the river having cubs and has returned with her family. This is where sightings and, sadly, corpses can confirm these assumptions. We had the resident dog otter killed on the road in February 2003. Three months later (gestation is 62 days) and for the next three months we found little fresh spraint and then suddenly, on the fourth month, we found spraint everywhere in sets of three; and we are still finding large quantities. Was our bitch serviced by the dog before he was run over and is she now back on the river with her family? If our calculations are correct the youngsters should be about ready to leave home now, so hopefully there is also another dog otter sniffing around.

I also plot fresh anal jelly on another sheet but this time I just put the amount found each month to see if there is any pattern e.g. time of year, or time of oestrus etc. So far I have proved nothing conclusively but there is always a chance the results will tie in with other evidence. I also keep a copy of the forms we send Karen at SERC, but I put much more information on my copy, including other flora and fauna seen. This work has only served to increase my fascination and curiosity about otters, which to me epitomize the free spirit of the wild.

I hope these notes will help you to get more out of your own otter recording and perhaps you will think of some ideas of your own to help us understand the behaviour of these special animals.

Janet Dixon

DO WE NEED MORE LATERAL THINKING?

We tend to assume that an otter territory extends up and down a main water channel, with occasional forays up side streams and cross country to well stocked ponds. BUT -

- What if otter territories extend across country to take in just small stretches of several parallel rivers, canals etc?
- What if the evidence we find on 'our' river is not one otter traveling up and down, but several crossing between catchments and doing a spot of fishing in each river encountered?
- What if there is no standard pattern of behaviour? What if otters are highly individualistic creatures who carve themselves out a territory that suits their own particular likes and dislikes?

- What if the only way a young otter can establish a territory for itself is to have a long thin cross country one squeezed into the no-mans-land between existing territories.

One can 'What if' until the cows come home. But if we do not question what we find we will never start looking laterally and maybe finding some of the answers.

THE TWO DAY EVENT

It might be timely to recap on the methods to be employed and the follow up for this important item in the calendar. Old hands will excuse the repetition I am sure.

- On DAY 1 you carry out your usual monthly survey and record your findings in the usual way. The only difference is that you remove all trace of all evidence you find.
- Transpose the results to the **Special Two Day Event Survey Form**. A 'spare' copy of the Form is enclosed. I know a lot of you picked one up at the last meeting but a lot of you were not there - and things do sometimes go astray!
- On DAY 2 you carry out another survey, recording your findings only on the Two Day Event Form.

This gives a snapshot of what happened over night, and therefore gives a fairly accurate picture of the number of otters about on the rivers surveyed.

Unfortunately we still have a lot of gaps in our coverage of the river systems in Somerset, and hopefully the formation of Sub-Groups in each catchment will help to fill these, by rationalising some of the work being done by existing members, and by encouraging a bit of corporate recruiting in the various areas where the gaps occur.

Once you have completed your Day 2 Survey it is very important to get the Forms to James as quickly as possible.

The best way to do that is to roll up at The Victory Inn, where you can watch your results being written into the bigger picture. It is also a jolly good social gathering and an excellent opportunity to exchange views and experiences and to catch up on the latest news.

The Victory Inn is at Allerford, right by the railway line between Norton Fitzwarren and Bradford-on-Tone. OS Landranger reference: ST 183249. If you're unsure where it is, call one of the Officers before the event, or The Victory Inn (01823 461 282) on the day.

If you would prefer not to have the Ploughman's Lunch there will be a range of hot food available to order at the bar under your own arrangements.

I hope to see as many as possible of you there. Meanwhile, please complete and return the Form opposite - to me - as soon as possible, and certainly no later than the 10th of April, PLEASE!

John Dixon