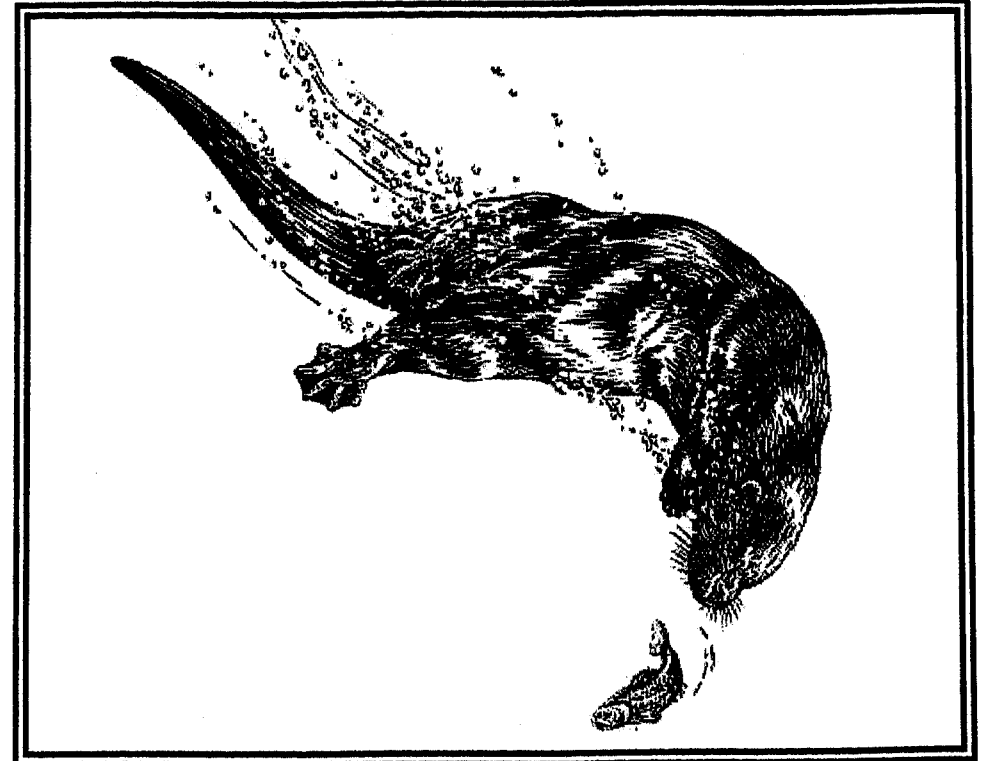




Somerset Wildlife Trust Otter Group

NEWSLOTTER 19 SEPTEMBER 2004



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EDITORIAL

Dear Member -

We've been very busy this year with several surveys which have enlarged our knowledge of the 'beast in question'. It is also good to see increased cooperation with our neighbours, to mutual benefit. James Williams summarises the results below. Anne Jones reports on an enviable trip to Brazil to experience ecotourism on the Rio Negro.

If you are coming to the next meeting on October 18th, please complete and return the form at the back of the **Newsletter**.

Best Wishes

John

NEXT MEETING:

The Victory Inn, Norton Fitzwarren, on Monday 18th October.

Dr. Paul Chanin, the writer and otter researcher, will be along to update us on the latest developments in otter conservation and research, and to help us plan the ways in which our group should go.

If you intend to come, please complete the form at the rear of this Newsletter.

OTTER GROUP ACTIVITIES

The Otter Group has been very busy this spring. In addition to regular recording, our annual simultaneous Two-day Survey of the whole county was the biggest ever. 55 surveyors turned in records for 275 sites, of which 198 (72%) were positive, and fresh evidence disclosed the presence of over 50 otters. We also combined with Devon and Dorset to do a full survey of the river Axe: 6 surveyors covered 85 sites, of which 63 (74%) were worked, a minimum of 6 territories. Three days were devoted to the Brue valley, where 78 sites came in at 56 % positive, with a population of the order of ten or a dozen otters. Finally two members spent a day checking sites in an area north-east of the Mendip - the headwaters of the Bristol Avon - and found good otter work at 6 out of 11 sites picked at random off a map (55%); there was fresh work from at least four different otters. We have also recorded 16 deaths in the first half of the year, which is 30% of the number we found in the whole county!

These statistics will form a useful baseline from which to monitor the welfare of this very rare animal. The use of the special form for the Two-day Event finally overcame our biggest ongoing problem, people's reluctance to record negatives properly. If we continue with these forms we will produce a series of records which can be properly compared.

FULL SURVEY OF RIVER AXE (SOUTH COAST)

A simultaneous survey of the whole of the Axe catchment was undertaken by a small group of enthusiasts on 6th May 2004. Six volunteers from the Otter Groups of the Wildlife Trusts of Devon, Dorset and Somerset looked at 85 sites, a search which covered nearly all the streams which make up this system.

They based their method of survey on that suggested in the recently published booklet *Monitoring the Otter*, one of the new "Conserving Nature 2000" series drawn up under the European Union's LIFE Nature Programme. Their aim is to produce an up-to-date and viable method of monitoring important species in a consistent way, so that one river can be compared with another, and one year with the next. This will establish a reliable database and be able to measure trends. The programme recommends that all rivers identified as Special Areas of Conservation should be surveyed regularly in this way.

As the booklet was not produced until late February 2004, this survey of the Axe, a candidate SAC, may well turn out to be a European first. More importantly, it has enabled us to ascertain that last year's worries about the otter population on the Axe were largely unfounded, and probably a product of the prolonged dry weather. And for the first time the difficulties and inconsistencies which result from the Axe's flowing through three different counties have been sorted out.

There is now a consistently produced and reported base-line survey, good enough - although it can of course be improved and tweaked - to serve as the first in an ongoing series. If in future there is a repeat of the disaster of 2000, when eight dead otters were collected from this area, the effect will be able to be observed and monitored. 85 sites were checked; 63 had evidence of otter activity, which is 74%. This fits in exactly with the pattern of west to east declining percentages observed in the 4th National Otter Survey of 2000-01: to the west the Exe scored 90%, the Otter 79%, while the Parrett to the east came in at 55%. We found no significant stretch of river without evidence of otters. In the National Surveys the Axe is mostly missed out, as it falls in a "white" square on the chessboard pattern that they use to cover the country. So this survey fills an important gap.

Spraints were assessed according to the survey recommendations, under three categories of age or deterioration. When the sites with the freshest category were plotted onto a map, they seemed to fall neatly into clusters, with considerable gaps between. If each of these is taken to indicate the recent zone of activity of one otter, one obtains a population count of 6 at least, and very possibly 9 animals. The assumption is that each is an unaccompanied solo adult. There may well be bitches with cubs travelling with them, but the method cannot distinguish this. The distances and spacings involved in these "ranges" accorded pretty well with those revealed by the DNA based survey of the nearby River Tone.

One must of course be very cautious in trying to do this sort of interpretation, translating evidence of an animal's passing into animals themselves. Firstly and obviously, one will not be recording any animal that is trying to conceal its

presence from the other otters, which must happen frequently in such a territorial and aggressive species. Secondly, there were a few gaps in our cover, which with more manpower we could eliminate next time: we omitted all the estuary and the marshes below the main coastal road, a frequent haunt of otters, as almost impossible to survey; we missed the Borcombe, Bruckland and Cory streams; and we found nothing fresh on the Yarty, which was very surprising, given the recent reports. Perhaps that otter was higher up than we looked on the day. None of us reported mink work.

Besides providing a valuable snapshot of a SAC river not surveyed in the national series, and which therefore had never been looked at in its entirety before, it was an interesting exercise, and provided a valuable try-out of the new method. And we all found it fun to do, and fascinating to see such a gamut of otter evidence, anal jellies, sand and grass castlings, paths and slides, spraints of all vintages, tantalising pad marks, and possible holts. So we intend to repeat it all, without the gaps, and, despite cautioning ourselves as to the difficulties of turning evidence into otters, we intend to do it all twice, on consecutive days, which may give us a chance to try to interpret the known activity of one night.

TWO-DAY EVENT 2004 23/24 APRIL 2004

The annual Two-day Event, a simultaneous survey of the whole county, took place in good weather and with the water levels normal for the spring, so that most spraint sites were available. 54 sets of surveyors sent in records, more than we have managed before. Between them they covered 275 sites; 198 of these had otter evidence (72%). Four observers had a totally blank patch, but only one river, the Bratton stream, was devoid of evidence. Otters can be said to be widely spread through most of Somerset, but we looked at only two sites east of the Brue, so the situation in the north-eastern end of the county remains unknown. 37 patches contained fresh evidence from the Saturday night ("hits"), which is not to say that there were 37 otters, of course; some degree of overlap is inevitable. In addition 7 people had fresh evidence on the first day, but nothing new on the night in question, ("near miss").

In total there were 71 hits and 7 near misses. As in previous years, an informed guesstimate of how many otters this might be the work of has been made. In some instances it is obvious that the distances involved are so great that it must without doubt be the work of more than one animal; in others there is room for doubt, and arbitrary judgements have to be made. Last year 26 hits and 14 near misses were adjudged to be about 30 otters, with 21 and 24 from the previous two surveys. This year it looks like 54 otters.

I do not think that one can infer from this that otter numbers have doubled. As they are very aggressively territorial, (47% of the ones we send for post-mortem have wounds from fighting), this would be very improbable. Much of this increase must be the result of better coverage by more people. But the survey as a whole does indicate that Somerset has a widespread and viable population of this rare animal.

From The Sportsman, 1851:

We fancy King Otter's followers at the extreme of his British Empire - say Devon - will be ready to speak up for his promotion from the rascal tribe, and with such a character we may leave him, "an animal of courage, talent and activity, famed for the beauty and splendour of his haunts, nice and delicate in his taste" and if perhaps a little extravagant and luxurious in his living, innately generous and bountiful.

RIVER BRUE CATCHMENT - OTTER SURVEY 2004

The Somerset Otter group undertook a major survey of the Brue Valley in spring 2004 for signs of otters. The background to this was the ongoing series of disappointing statistics from previous examinations of this area (*Williams, A review of otter records from the Brue Valley, July 2001*). The most recent cause for anxiety about the apparent low level of the otter population in this area of highly suitable habitat came from the results of the Fourth National Otter Survey, 2000-2002, (*Crawford, Fourth Otter Survey of England, Environment Agency, May 2003*), when the Brue valley came in at 29% only. This was well below the national result of 35%, and only 2% up on its score in the previous national survey, at a time when most other areas had shown considerable increases. The adjoining rivers to the west showed strong increases, the Parrett from 14% to 55%, and the Axe from 20% to 47%.

Survey Method

However, as only the upper reaches of the Brue came into the consideration of the national surveys, it was felt appropriate to try a full survey of the whole system. The method chosen was that proposed in *Chanin, Monitoring the Otter, (Conserving Natura 2000 Life series)*. This survey method has been devised for rivers that are designated as Special Areas of Conservation, to provide uniform and therefore comparable data. Although the River Brue is not a SAC, so much of the valley is designated in one way or another, and it contains so many dedicated nature reserves, that it was felt appropriate to enable it to be compared with other rivers in this way.

The survey took place on three days, the 21st March, and the 24th and 25th April. 63 sites were checked on Day 1, 51 on Day 2, and 42 on Day 3. Days 2 and 3 were part of the Otter Group's annual two day survey of the whole of the county of Somerset; the main aim of this is to ascertain the whereabouts of otters on the intervening night, so once fresh evidence has been found on Day 2 the surveyor moves on to another area. There is no point in locating two adjacent fresh spraints; one is enough to define the overnight presence of an otter. This accounts for the reduced number of sites looked at on the second day. Unfortunately this produces a slight downward slew on the statistics from the point of view of the overall Brue survey.

Results

The results are presented in a series of tables; only the summary tables are shown below. **Table 1** gives a summary of these findings for the total survey; **Table 2** for the separate days.

Table 3 is less factual than the others, and its findings must be treated as tentative. By charting the sites with fresh evidence onto a map, an attempt has been made to evaluate the evidence in terms of the minimum number of otters present. These scores are for areas frequented, not the number of otters present; at one area it is known that there is a bitch and two cubs. These clusters are of interest to those who worked so hard to produce these results, it falls in line with the Otter Group's annual Two-day Event, and may help in calming anglers whose fisheries have suffered predation. On Day Two, 7 distinct areas appeared on the map. On Day Three the demarcation was less clear, but there were 7 minimum, probably 9, and possibly a maximum of 10 areas where an otter had been working that night. The first day of the survey, a month earlier, found 5 minimum, 6 or 7 probables, and 8 maximum, all of which fitted the pattern revealed by the Two-day Event.

Limits?

Thoughtful consideration of the map of this catchment suggests that there is not much room for many more otter territories, although the North Drain was worked only on Day One. Despite the difficulty of checking large areas of marshland thoroughly the survey has probably given an adequate indication of the extent of the otter population.

Their locations are not as widespread as our population surveys would suggest we ought to expect: eight from the Tone, and five from the Parrett, with one each from the Exe, the Axe and the Barle. Is this a reflection of the strong otter areas, or the areas with most traffic, or are we just missing some cases elsewhere? Why the cluster effect? At one stage we seemed to get a huge number from the northern streams on the Dixons' patch near Minehead. Before that it was the turn of the A39, and before that again the southern Axe, with eight in a year. What sort of numbers can we expect when the rain gets back to a normal pattern again, and we get some serious spates? Sad though this wastage is, it does give an intriguing glimpse into the mysterious world of the riversides at night.

MINK

These are much less common than dead otters nowadays and hereabouts. A trapping programme has eliminated a large number (over 70) out on the Levels, but apart from that they are almost unheard of. A recent study claims that there is good scientific evidence that the resurgent otters eliminate them systematically. So we ought to record them very carefully: a recovery in the mink population might just indicate a collapse in the otters.

TRICK QUESTION No.2

Last time, the trick question was, when is an otter like an orange Ford Cortina. Not surprisingly, nobody came up with the right answer, which was "always", according to Patrick Lehain, the author of the article.

In the spring, James & Elizabeth Williams were driving back from Tiverton along the Link Road, when James shouted out, "Stop, Stop!" Not altogether surprisingly, Elizabeth ignored him, and carried on up the dual-carriageway until there was a lay-by. James walked all the way back, only to find that the dead otter on the central reservation was in fact a fox. A few days later Karen Coxon sportingly related against herself, how, when driving near Tiverton, she had had difficulty finding a place to stop to pick up a dead otter which turned out to be a fox. Then Charlie Hamilton James rang up and told how, on his way to Devon ... yes, you've guessed it. Well, if those three can't tell the difference in daylight ...!

Question: Which otter group member recently skidded to an urgent halt on the A303, for a hare?

ANNE JONES IN BRAZIL

Last year I joined an **Earthwatch** team to go to the **Pantanal** in Brazil. The **Pantanal** is a vast wetland area stretching across 210,000 sq. km., nearly the size of France. There is a dramatic annual flood cycle, when about half the area is inundated. In the dry season the water recedes from the enormous flood plain to leave a network

DEAD OTTERS

Sixteen corpses in the first six months of 2004, despite a long period of very low rainfall. Eight of them made it to the Veterinary Investigation Centre for post-mortem by Vic Simpson, and some interesting findings are at present being written up. Three of the others were unconfirmed reports, one was just a skeleton revealed when somebody cleared some vegetation, and two were too ripe to be worth collecting. Vic is now doing only whole and wholesome corpses, as they reveal useful information, but as a group we need to record all casualties, however old. Not all of these were road kills; four were well away from traffic, and two of them showed how tough and resilient otters must be, in that they were so sick that they should have been dead long before. several times over.

f permanent river channels and isolated shallow basins. The grassland which then flourishes supports huge cattle ranches, Fazendas. The amazing abundance of mammals such as jaguars, peccaries, anteaters and otters, as well as numerous birds, rheas, macaws, and wetland species, has increased ecotourism in the Pantanal, due to the relative ease of observing these species, and the scenic beauty of the place. Because it does not disturb cattle ranching, the main economic activity of the region, the ranch owners are regarding ecotourism as a profitable and alternative activity. Many farms are being partly run as hotels.

Conservation International and Earthwatch have formed a partnership to achieve the conservation of the Pantanal and its surrounds. They will do this by having sustainable management of the region, protecting it from the effects of mining, agricultural intensification, overfishing, and other forms of development. Conservation International believes that wildlife tourism, if well managed, is another way of benefiting local people.

Earthwatch teams were helping to find the more important requirements for the survival and health of the neotropical river otter and the giant otter, aiming to develop sustainable use of the waterways for ecotourism. It is easier to study the biological and ecological features of these species as they are diurnal.

We studied them in the main river, the Rio Negro. Our aims were to discover the characteristics of dens, resting sites and latrines used by the otters. These sites had been mapped and labelled, and were monitored at monthly intervals. The spraints were collected and analysed back in the laboratory to determine the diet of the two species. Individual giant otters can be identified by cream coloured patterns on the throat; these have been put in a data bank by filming, photography and drawing. Our surveys were carried out at dawn and sunset, when the otters emerge or return to their dens. Sometimes we went down the river to known dens and waited for the otters to emerge at dawn and start fishing. On one occasion we followed a group of four to a good fishing site under a bridge with rocks. There we watched for about an hour, seeing them fish, then play and sit on the rocks scratching themselves. On another occasion we went in two-man canoes and followed a pair of giant otters, known to the researchers from their markings. They swam along the edge of the river, then crossed the bank into a small oxbow lake. We followed on foot and sat on the lake's edge to watch. The male was being very brave and protective, and would swim up to within 15 metres of us, stick his head up and make a very angry squeaking noise, telling us to leave.

It really was a memorable experience and I hope that the research into their behaviour, habitat, and the effect of the ecotourism will help maintain a healthy population.

If anyone is interested in more information about Earthwatch, contact www.earthwatch.org/europe, or email info@earthwatch.org.uk