

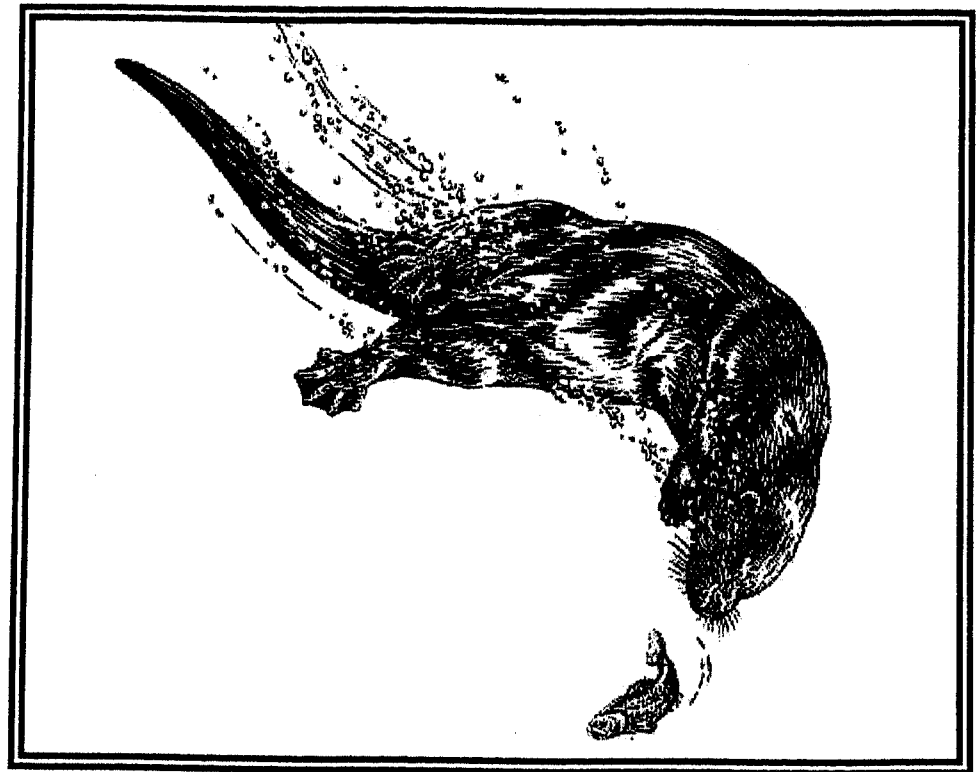
Renew



Somerset Wildlife Trust Otter Group

NEWSLOTTER 20

APRIL 2005



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 -

Spring is here and it's time for the annual Two Day Event. This year the key difference is that forms will be submitted by post, so please get the results back promptly. So plenty of change, both for us and the natural world ..

Best Wishes

John

TWO DAY EVENT, May 7-8, 2005:

This is our main survey of the year. The aim is for as full a picture of the county as possible. If you have to be absent please let us know so that some form of cover can be arranged. It is hoped that the series of local get-togethers (see section on **Local Meetings** below) will enable us to get rid of some of the duplication which came to light last year, and to identify important gaps which need allocating.

Objective

The aim is to freeze the otter activity along all our rivers by checking everywhere for fresh signs deposited in a single night. This negates the duplication and overlapping with which the mobility of the otters normally confuses surveys.

Day One

Check all your sites carefully on Day One, not too late in the day to avoid leaving your scent. Scuff out or wash off any footprints, and deface, but do not remove, any recent spraints. Therefore you will be sure to recognise any fresh evidence the next day, when you repeat the search.

Day Two

On Day Two it only matters to contact your otter; you do not need to find every single sign, just to ascertain what parts of your patch have been visited the previous night. Be sure to enter your results for this Two Day survey on the special form supplied, and *please* enter all **negative** results from the first day. We want to know where the otters are **not**, as much as where they are. If you cannot do the Saturday and the Sunday, the Friday & Saturday will do, or the Sunday & Monday, but if you are to be away, please let us know.

Data Collation

Once you have completed your survey forms, please return them to:

James Williams, Stoford Manor, West Buckland, Wellington, TA21 9LS

The results will be collated and distributed possibly via the Local Groups but certainly through the autumn Newsletter.

LOCAL MEETINGS

As was suggested at several of the meetings last year, it is felt that the Otter Group in its expanded size would operate more efficiently if people got together in local huddles to talk about the area they know. So the membership has been divided by address and catchment into seven sub-sets, based on Exmoor and the North coast, Wellington, Taunton, Bridgwater, Langport & Ilminster, the Brue valley, and the North-east. It is proposed to hold an informal get-together for each of these areas. Some areas have already held their first meetings and the feedback is pleasingly positive

From all this we should have an updated and accurate list of everybody's patches, and by inference we will recognise the major gaps in our survey cover. This will make Patrick's task on his computer much easier, and streamline the activities of the group.

There are 54 members on the Active list, but 10 do not seem to have sent in any records recently. In addition there are 21 Current Members who support and help in various ways, but do not at present survey a patch. And 6 new recruits. Properly organised, that is 81 people who can do a lot for this scarce and vulnerable animal.

RIVER AXE (SOUTH COAST) SURVEY, MARCH 2005

The Axe runs through three counties, and until last year was not being properly looked at, although it is a very 'ottery' river. In March 2004 a small group of us undertook the first full survey of the whole catchment, as a Two Day Event. A repeat survey planned for the autumn had to be called off due to the rain.

This year a dozen of us checked 89 sites, 66 of which had otter evidence, which gives a score of 74.1%, exactly the same as last year. A crude attempt to evaluate the fresh evidence into numbers of different otters present comes out at a minimum of 6 or 7, and a maximum of 11. Last year we estimated 6 at least, and possibly 9. Each set of fresh evidence is taken as the work of only one otter for scoring purposes, but this year one of them was seen to be a bitch and two cubs a couple of days later. Mink evidence was found at only one site.

It is interesting that the scores for the two years turned out so similar, as the conditions were very different. This year the water was very low, and had been for a long time beforehand, which rendered most of the riverside mud pretty useless for padding.

This is the second systematic search for this BAP Priority Species on this river, half of which is designated a Special Area of Conservation. By doing the whole catchment in this way we have laid down a baseline from which future trends can be assessed. That this ought to be done for nearly every area is shown by the recent case on one of the tributaries of the Axe, where ongoing pollution resulted in a fine and preventative engineering measures costing over £10k. Such incidents are not

uncommon, and can damage the wildlife potential of a river for a long time; fewer insects, fewer fish, fewer otters.

All our rivers are under stress at the moment from silt, nitrate runoff, sheep dips, crop sprays, endocrine disrupters, flame retardants - the list seems endless. Yet all the publicity put out by fund-seeking conservation charities implies that things are getting much better, especially for the otter, and this results in most county groups having volunteers give up because there is no point any more. Which is, I suppose, better than a few years ago, when they gave up because they never found any otters.

But, at the risk of preaching to the converted, here is an article I wrote for Simon Reece's Bristol Avon newsletter.

The Need to Survey For Otters

2005: it is now 20 years since the first signs of a recovery in the otter population in Somerset, 20 years since they first started to totter eastwards from the Exe, back towards the rivers and moors where they had been so plentiful in the '50s and '60s. Now, they are seemingly almost as abundant again. Whereas in 1984 I had only 12 records for the whole of my survey area of 4,100 sq. km, last year I recorded 28 dead otters. I know of no part of Somerset where there are still no otters. So perhaps it is time to review what purposes continuing monitoring may serve, and to wonder if I would not be better to spend more time in my garden.

To which the answer is 'No'. Hunt records show that in the early sixties the packs found an average of 450 otters each year, yet by the time the concerned conservationists had organised the first national survey in 1977, as a response to the evident collapse of the otter population, it found only 170 places with any evidence at all. This represented a mere 6% of the places checked. The collapse had been sudden, and in most places, total. By 1986 this had crept up to nearly 10%, by 1994, it was 22%, and in 2002 36%. This means that 64% of the sites looked at only two years ago were still otterless.

You in the Avon valley are about where we in Somerset were say 10 years ago, recording the return of this rare and elusive animal as it happens. Please do not assume that it will all be straightforward and smooth, and that it is just a matter of time before you too have wall-to-wall (or bank-to-bank?) otters. The River Otter was recolonised three times before they finally established themselves enough to breed. The original settlers died out twice.

That this could happen again is implicit in some of the findings from Vic Simpson's analysis of the dead otters he has for post-mortem. They still carry a considerable burden of pollution. This is recognised by the recent elevation of the otter tissue analysis programme to become part of the national monitoring for the health of the environment; human health, that is. Some of these pollutants have a harmful effect on very young cubs, so presumably many bitch otters have little breeding success. If you consider that the 28 dead ones I recorded last year represent about 15 litters

from those that did manage to raise young, and that otters do not breed every year, it is no wonder their expansion is slow and precarious. We need to keep monitoring, in case a collapse sets in again.

Especially in the Somerset/Avon area, which is still the current frontier of expansion. In the last national survey, north and west Devon scored high percentages, 90, 89, 87, even 100 for one catchment; the Tone was lower at 75%, the Brue feeble at 29%, and the next rivers east of there were 18%, 11% and 7%. This against a national score of 36%. Your survey is recording important and reassuring data: should expansion cease, you will be the first to spot it.

The finer the detail, the better, of course. Some of us in Somerset check the same place every day. By expressing our positives as a percentage of checkable days we are starting to measure trends. I was surprised at the severity of the blip at my site after just one farm pollution, and at how long it took before the otters found my stream to their liking again. It's very easy, all you need is a dog.

Properly kept regular records ought to be able to shed some light on some of the mysteries about these much studied and little known animals. Firstly, to what extent do they have patterns of patrol, either over days or with the seasons? When one's otter vanishes for six or more weeks, where has it gone? Who has borrowed it?

Other areas we ought to be able to look into include otters away from water, otters crossing catchment watersheds, aggression and/or sociability, otters and/or mink, otters in towns, otters in daytime, use of seasonal foods, breeding seasons and cycles. There's really no end to it. Keep up the good work.

AUTUMN MEETING

Dr Paul Chanin was the guest speaker at our autumn meeting, and entertained some 25 members with a very encouraging in-depth and up-to-date appraisal of where otters and otter research "is at". It was encouraging because it seemed from what he said that as a group we are progressing along the right lines, and are contributing well to what is going on. He stressed that our regular surveys of their range and distribution are still very valid. Other areas are not nearly so well 'ottered' as ours is, and they are still creeping across the country, with the boundary just to our east. Simon Reece from the Avon catchment said that they were getting increasing results, but that the all-important tops of the river in Wiltshire were not being reported on.

Dr Chanin showed some of the statistics from the National Surveys, which reinforced the value of our studies. He also explained how the DNA work was evaluated, and showed some of the latest findings about how otters have been spreading in Hampshire and Sussex, where an unique genetic allele can prove the origins of some of the corpses. Sadly, although a new DNA research project has been started at Exeter, our rivers are not to be included. Nor is it likely that the research will result in an available method of using DNA more widely.

However, he was able to give us some interesting statistics from the collection of otter corpses that we have been supporting. Details of these have been entered onto a database of his devising, and he showed us some of the information that could be pulled down from it. For example, 30% of road deaths happen away from water. This is starting to throw some light on the twin mysteries of transient otters and the dispersal of young animals.

The database also permits the identification of danger spots for otters, and several successful safety measures have been put in. More of this has been done in Devon than in Somerset, although the M5 in Somerset showed up in the statistics as especially lethal.

And all our otters have been going to the post-mortem programme, the first ten years of which is being written up at the moment. Very many of the otters have been recently involved in fights, some of them very serious set-tos rather than a bit of territorial border sniping, and in some cases the direct cause of the animal's death.

Various internal disorders and infections have come to light already, which explains why the whole programme was lifted last April from merely a research project to being part of the mainstream ecotoxicology monitoring of the EA, as required under the European Water Framework Directive, funded by the Agency's Chemical Strategy dept. The store of tissue samples, livers etc, is at present being analysed for various pesticides and pollutants, endocrine disrupters for instance, which so confuse the internal workings of male roach that they produce eggs, or flame retardants, which are known to be bad for human health. Some otters have very enlarged adrenal glands, which may be either the cause or the effect of the fighting.

Perhaps all this fighting is triggered by anxiety on the part of the otters about their food supply. Early research by Dr Chanin and others indicated that about 80% of the prey of otters was eels, but these are now down to 1% of their former population, at a time when all the rivers hereabouts are showing acute depletions of fish of other kinds, and the angling clubs are undertaking all kinds of rescue efforts. So what can the otters be eating? There is scope here for a serious look at the diet of lowland otters.

Dr Rafael Miranda is looking at the use made by otters of the newly introduced Sunbleak on the Levels, and we have been asked to collect spraints for him from the Bridgwater area.. There have been discussions about our looking into the extent to which otters take birds, by recording and examining spraints with feathers in them. Two of the volunteers from SERC appealed to the meeting for us all to record and collect any spraints with crayfish remains; their interest is in locating crayfish, of either sort, but it would also be very revealing for us to find out how much otters are taking this sort of food.

So Dr Chanin gave us plenty to think about, and plenty for us to do.

POST-MORTEM PROGRAMME

From 10th April 2005, Vic Simpson at the Wildlife Veterinary Investigation Centre will be taking our dead otters again. Until then, freeze them. After that date chill them, but do not freeze them. He does not want antiques or badly damaged ones, so no otter-shaped biltong, please, nor smelly, juicy ones.

We of course want to record as much detail as we can about the unusable ones as well as those that go for autopsy, and a copy of all the details will go to the EA's central database. Seven dead ones in the first three months of this year, three of them from the Tone.

PRE-HISTORIC OTTER SURVEY? - Patrick McCormack

In recent years I have spent several holidays drifting gently around the Dordogne in south-west France. Sometimes literally drifting, as it is very relaxing to hire a canoe and just 'go with the flow' down the Dordogne or Vézère. On occasions a lost paddle or an unintentional reversal of direction might lead to a little friction with the crew, but as yet I have not received the divorce papers.

As many of you will know, this area of France has numerous examples of cave art and other artefacts relating to our distant ancestors. There is something quite magical in entering such caves as Les Combarelles, Font des Gaumes or the replica of Lascaux and witnessing these extraordinary works of art. The eyes of these ancient artists were keen and they caught with remarkable precision and economy of line the species that they saw around them and on which they depended for their food, clothing and tools. So one sees plentiful images of bison, reindeer, rhinoceros and mammoth, with occasional big cats and bears. But what about this one:



This is certainly a mustelid, but which one? Could it even be an otter? The tail is a bit short and possibly it is one of the otter's less distinguished relations, but it is entertaining to speculate. As the majority of the animals depicted in the caves where sources of food, I wonder if our predecessors watched for the otter and took his hunting as a sign that good fishing was to be had. A rather less complicated form of otter surveying!

Whatever the truth, the image shows once again the elegant simplicity of prehistoric art.

The image is in the Caverne de Niaux in the department of Ariège. More information can be found on the European Prehistoric Art website: <http://www.europreart.net>.