

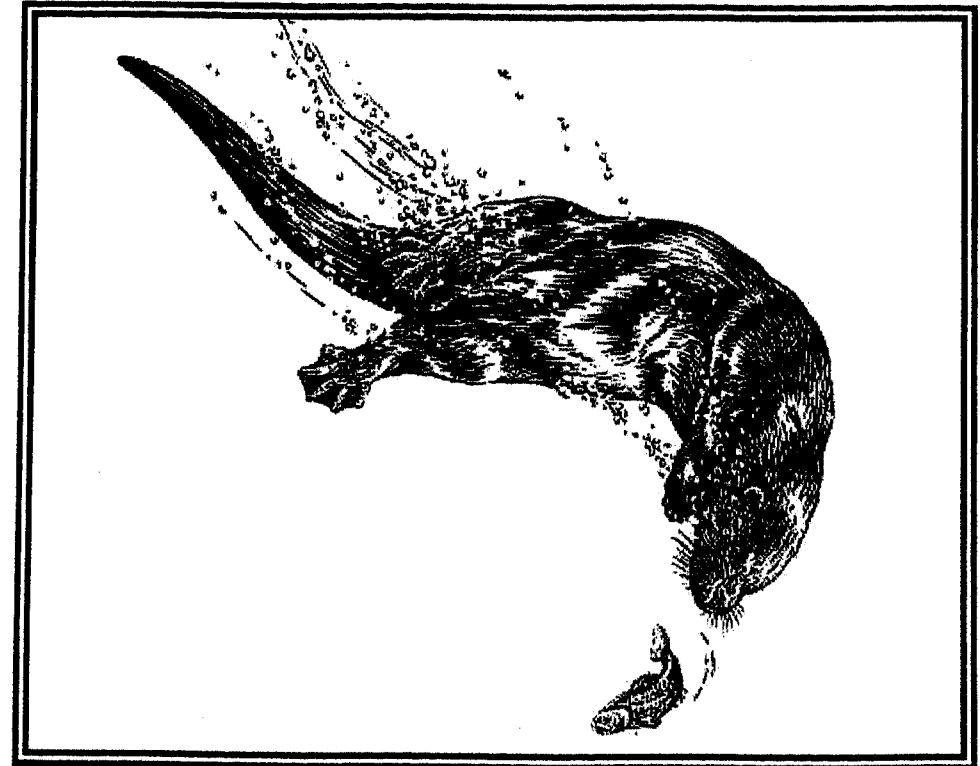
James Williams



Somerset Wildlife Trust Otter Group

NEWSLOTTER 21

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EDITORIAL

Dear Member -

In this Newsletter James Williams brings us up to speed on the results of this year's Two-day Event and also on the Axe Survey. But while there is good news, there are also worrying signs with the appearance of some nasty parasites, so read on ..

Best wishes

John

NEXT MEETING, October 10, 2005:

Vic Simpson on Post Mortem results

The man himself - in person! Roll up, roll up to hear all the amazing details of what he has unearthed in the post-mortems. Not just the new parasite unique to our Somerset otters, but also some of the latest results of the tissue analysis, which is the reason behind the recent promotion of his otter studies to frontline monitoring of the water environment under European health precautions.

You will be convinced that what we do in our surveys as a group is not just an entertaining hobby, but is of far wider importance, and has a direct relevance to the general health of the whole environment.

Vic Simpson is a very convincing speaker, and his presentations are widely acclaimed. We are very lucky to get such a busy man; this is an evening not to be missed. We shall therefore be in the big room at The Victory Inn, not the usual conservatory.

Please note that, unlike previous evenings, we shall make a charge of £4 to cover expenses, but the bonus is that you will get a hot supper included! Arrive from 7 pm for a 7:30 pm start. Talk first, supper afterwards. Please fill in the form at the end of this Newsletter and return it John Dixon at the address given.

SPRING MEETINGS

This year the group held seven local meetings instead of the one centralised event. They were more informal in atmosphere, and enabled people to meet their neighbouring surveyors and discuss who should go where. Overlaps and anomalies were ironed out, gaps were recognised, and new members met local guides.

As a result the membership lists were considerably tidied and rearranged. The first benefit of all this was that the Two-Day Event was considerably more efficient than ever before. Secondly, we have identified 104 survey areas, of which 71 are covered at the moment. There are some interesting patches vacant on Exmoor, and lots of very important gaps in North-east Somerset; we have also very little idea of what is going on in the recently recolonised waters that flow to the Bristol Avon.

At the autumn meeting we will have to decide if we would like to repeat this format next spring.

AXE VALLEY CATCHMENT: TWO-DAY SURVEY, March 2005.

The Axe runs through three counties and, although otters have been often reported on it, until last year it was not being looked at methodically. 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 for 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, when 85 sites were looked at and 63 were positive. A crude attempt to evaluate the fresh evidence into the number 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 year we recorded the height of the spraints above the water level. If the otters had been faithful to their habitual sprainting sites the distance should have been considerable. However many of the spraints were virtually at water level; the lesson from this is that much of the evidence must be washed away every time a river rises.

The River Yarty again failed to produce fresh work, although it is frequently used by otters. This could just be coincidence, that the otters happened to be absent both years. Or it could be a seasonal variation. Or it could be a strong hint that there are limitations to the efficacy of our method. The Kitt, the Synderford and the top of the main river above Clapton all also underperformed. Whether these were true readings may be shown by the next survey in the autumn.

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. The method used is that laid down in the latest booklet from the European Union's LIFE Nature programme, so the results should be directly comparable with those from other rivers.

ANOTHER ALIEN NASTY?

Sue Farrington found some living, white amoeba-like things sliming about in spraints at the top of the Tone, at Clatworthy reservoir. They are about the area of a fingernail, and have been seen there on two occasions. Vic Simpson has also found them in the gut of one otter from the Isle, rather bigger versions. Please keep an eye out, and collect any spraints with worms or any other foreigners on board.

TWO-DAY EVENT 2005

This year's Two-Day Event took place in cold but dry conditions on 7th and 8th May. Water levels were low, and the cold, dry spring had held some of the bankside vegetation back, so surveying was easier than in some other years. Some 50 people covered 58 stretches of river; they looked at 239 sites and found positive evidence at 166, which is 69%, a figure which fits well with previous results. 30 people claimed fresh "hits" on Day 2, and 8 had "near misses" on Day 1 only. These were entered on a map, and the adjudicator estimated that it showed 39 ranges or territories. The rule of this game is that an area of evidence can be recorded as only one otter, which is of course the indisputable minimum, even if more than one was claimed to be present. So David Evans, for instance, scored only one otter from all the padding around Chard Road, although his strong idea that a bitch with cubs was involved was confirmed by photos a couple of days later. This strict interpretation means that there can be no disputing the scores when it comes to comparisons between years or areas. The strong pub rumours of sightings of a family party on the Donniford had to be ignored, which was perhaps as well, as they have not subsequently been repeated.

But of course some of the reports were valid, and the final score is only of territories, not otters. Eight or nine litters of cubs were reasonably claimed on good evidence; there may well have been others that we never suspected.

The ultimate aim of any natural history census must be to ascertain the number of animals present, and even to define the population structure. The DNA feasibility study was a promising start for us on this, but since its demise we have to try some other method of counting these scarce and extremely mobile animals. To consider how uncommon and widely spaced they are, one should compare how short a distance one would have to cover in Somerset to find 9 litters of fox cubs, or 9 occupied badger sets. So it is in my opinion urgent that we do try to quantify our result as best we can.

The map reveals our gaps in coverage. Assuming a similar pattern of density we could find room for ten or a dozen more occupied ranges. Call it a putative total of 50 ranges, and very generously allow two otters per range, and you get a maximum estimate of a hundred otters for the whole county. But only one fifth of our patches had proven cubs, so working strictly from what we know, we arrive at a guess-estimate for the whole of this otter-rich county of sixty otters. These numbers are dangerously assumed, of course, but they do give a scale by which to judge the presence or rarity of our otters, and against which to put last year's total of 29 recorded deaths.

So, in the absence of DNA, we must carry on with this valuable annual event, and try to make it as comprehensive as possible. In addition, as a form of population counting, we should record as carefully and fully as possible the two fixed factors of corpses and breeding bitches. Neither move very far, unlike the ever wandering dog otters and the dispersing and fugitive juveniles. Please make every effort to

check up on any reports of cubs on your patch, or sets of small footprints, and if you can, pass the report to me, James Williams, by phone (01823 461655). I am compiling a data set and a map in an attempt to make a serious effort at population monitoring.

The new forms worked very well, in that we again managed to get everybody to record their negatives, which we need to calculate a percentage, and for comparison with previous years and other surveys and regions. However a great many of you delayed a long time before sending them in, which made things much more difficult and slow at HQ, particularly as we were using them to cross-check the members and patches data from the local meetings.

Last year the group made a major effort in the Brue valley, and reassured itself that things were not as bad out there as they had seemed for several years. But this year there seemed to be a scarcity in several parts of the levels again. The North Drain, the Axe and the two Yeos produced only a very little stale evidence. The bird hide logbooks on that side of the Brue made little mention of otters since February, when two were seen together. Perhaps that was a pair, and the resulting cubs were being born in a secretive corner of the levels just about at the time of our survey. But until they turn up, if they do, we should be as vigilant as possible in that area.

The two litters of cubs to be seen on the South Drain were our only otters recorded in that half of the levels. In all that stretch of suitable habitat there ought to be more than three adults, or perhaps five if the February pair are still around. There was a young bitch otter killed on the A38 at Tarnock (River Axe) on 24th April, not long before the survey weekend. Mink turned up more than in previous years (6), but only in the east of the county. Nobody saw a Water Vole.

However, we must be aware too that the layout of all those swamps and peat diggings is such that otters have plenty of places to display their spraints without our being able to find them. Although James Williams saw both litters of cubs and what was presumably the dog otter during the course of one morning out there, he recorded only two spraints for the seven of them. And the worrying discovery of the recently imported gall fluke (see below) could be, or could become, a limiting factor on the otters of this area. We are very unlikely to find many of the dead otters from such an extensive area, so our annual surveys become doubly important here.

BIRTHS AND DEATHS

For the first time ever, births have more records than deaths. I have notes on 16 litters for the first half of 2005, and one from Devon. Two of them sadly come in under double entry book-keeping, in that the cub was found dead with the mother. On the Hillfarrance Brook both were run over together, but on the Isle they were found in very suspicious circumstances far from a road. The man who found and photographed the second two contacted the RSPCA and the Otter Trust, but got little more than a tour of the switch boards, a large dose of Vivaldi, and vague promises to get back to him which were not followed up. By the time he got on to the Otter Group the evidence had gone.

As far as is known, we think there are 24 living cubs, and 5 dead ones. 29 cubs from 16 litters is 1.8 cubs per litter, with a survival rate so far of 1.5. It would be very beneficial if we could develop this aspect of our surveying further. The static nature of cub production gives us a rare opportunity to assess part of the structure of the otters' population. Please pass on this information while it is fresh, and before the litters break up and the young disperse.

16 dead otters so far on our patch, plus four from the Exe near Tiverton. This is a little worrying in such a dry season; it is usually the floods that push them onto the roads. Of these 9 came from the Levels, and of those all 6 that went to Vic Simpson had symptoms of the *Pseud Damph* fluke.

NEW PARASITE DISCOVERED

Vic Simpson's assiduous researches into the dead otters from our group have discovered several instances of a gall fluke hitherto unrecorded in Britain. Out of 445 otters examined up to last August, only ten of them had the symptoms, all from the Somerset Levels except one, and from three of them the 1mm long, Russian imported, digenean fluke was demonstrated. *Pseudamphistomum truncatum* is a dangerous little beast, with a false mouth and a real one, which dwells in a fish host before maturing in the gall bladder of a mammal. In its home territory it has been found in dogs, foxes, seals and cats. In Belarus 70% of village cats had it, but this was discovered only because so many of the people were ill with it.

Although Vic has been looking at otters since 1988, the first case was not until 2000, which indicates that it has recently been imported, and the most probable method is through the introduction of an unassuming and rather grotty little minnow-like fish called a sunbleak. These are now quite widespread around the Levels. That *Pseud. Trunc.* is making the most of its chances is shown by the finding of three infected Mink out of a sample of seven.

Be extremely careful about touching any spraint.: the eggs of a creature only 1 mm long are less than invisible. The danger to people is sufficiently real for it to be even more important for us to secure every possible corpse for the post mortem programme. So many thanks to people like Katherine Kist, Pete Goldie and Dennis Pavey among others, who have put themselves out to ensure the collection of these corpses. We have also had good support from Elie West and Pauline Kidner at Secret World, and Andy Genge of Atkins M5 staff. Vic's recent interim report mentions all sorts of other aspects of his research which impinge, or might impinge, on the health not just of wildlife, but of domestic stock and ourselves. His talk to bring us up to speed on this in the autumn should be a 5 Star sellout event - see details on page 1.

COAST TO COAST OTTER

I have sometimes wondered if otters do in fact wander quite as far as Tarka is made to by Williamson in his book. There have been several road deaths on the North Devon link road which would suggest that they cross from the Taw to the Exe, and there were strong hints in the DNA study that a bitch otter recorded by Peter Hurman on the Bathern (Exe tributary) spent some time on the Tone near Waterrow before being run over on the way back. One killed on the very summit of the Blackdown ridge near Wellington Monument can only have been going from the Tone to the Culm, or vice versa.

But the most intrepid of all must be the otter which sprainted right on the top of Swap Hill on Exmoor this winter. The stream to the north ran to the Lyn and the north coast; the other way lay the infant Exe, starting out for the English Channel. I cannot believe that the otter expected that spraint to be found by others seeking normal information about their own kind. It was a flag planting boast at having crossed the very spine of England.

POST MORTEMES

Ten of our otters have been sent down to Truro for post-mortem by Vic and his new assistant Alex. This is a good proportion of those that were in a fit condition to be examined, so great thanks to all of you who put yourselves about to make this happen.

Vic is very busy writing up the whole of his research so far, including the chemical analysis, which, as those of you who have received reports on corpses submitted will know, does not feature in the preliminary findings. But it is a major point of the whole project, and will make sensational reading, I am sure. The whole idea is that otter tissues are a very good indicator of what is at large in solution in our waterways, because the otters focus the take up of all the fishes, which in turn focussed the intake of all the invertebrates, so that they act as a magnifying glass for whatever is potentially damaging in the environment.

So please keep up the supply of wholesome dead otters, unfrozen if possible. Smelly or mutilated remains should just be carefully recorded.

A LUCKY OTTER - AND DRIVER

A friend of a friend was sad to find that the animal which shot out under the wheels of his car near Black Cat on the Exe was an otter. He photographed the body with his mobile phone, and then rang up a chum, who suggested he collect it for us. So he went back, and just as he was bending to pick it up, the animal sneezed, staggered to its feet, and wobbled off into the wood. A lucky escape, and it would have made for some interesting fun at the traffic lights in Tiverton if he had collected it straight away.

WHITE SQUARE INFORMATION FOR THE NATIONAL BAP

At the time of the last National Survey we as a group took the trouble to do a full survey for the white square in the centre of Somerset, in addition to the black squares at either end of our county which are always looked at. This information has now been requested by the UK Steering Group for the Otter. A review is being undertaken of all the Biological Action Plans, and an update on the current status of the otter across the whole country is needed. An updated version of our white square survey has been invaluable to them.

This review looks at the number of 10km squares in England with evidence of occupation by otters during the last 5 years. For the whole UK the score is 75%, but for England alone it is only 61%. There is still 40% of the country where there have been no signs at all of an otter in this century. In the other 60% the pattern seems to be of areas of concentration, with sporadic otters foraging out from the core occasionally. The presence of these itinerants boosts the score considerably under this scheme of scoring: one solitary spraint is sufficient to make a 10km square positive, so the actual population is of course much lower than 61% would suggest. What we do is still very important and necessary.

OTTERS & POT NOODLES - Lyn Southway

Having spent more time than I care to calculate looking for otters and never seeing even a hint of a ripple in the water, I decided that 2005 was going to be THE year.

A good friend had brought me Philippa Forrester's book "The River" for Christmas. Together with Charlie Hamilton James, it's about a year filming otters and other wildlife on the river right on their doorstep. I have to say this inspired me immensely to be proactive and get out and about looking for my own otters.

So I set out on the 2nd of January with the new years resolution firmly fixed in my mind and headed for Westhay nature reserve.

Having wandered around for some time and not even finding a hint of spraint, let alone seeing any otters, I decided to cut my losses and go home. Luckily I passed the sign for the Shapwick reserve and thought I'd have a look.

I only went to the Meare hide as it was getting reasonably late by this time but thankfully met up with some lovely people who told me that "if it were o'ers that I were after, I should go to Canada Lake hide, tuther side ut road"

Armed with this information I went home and told my daughter that I was going to go early the next morning and stake it out and she and her friend decided it would be a good wheeze to go with me.

So armed with copious amount of hot water for coffee (me) and pot noodles (them) we set off. After waiting about an hour we were rewarded with not just one otter but three, a bitch and her cubs. I was so taken by my first, all to brief, glimpse of otters that I was quite emotional and have to admit to shedding one or two tears from absolute joy!

I have been back lots of times since to share the moment with friends and on my own, and have to say that if prepared to sit wait I have seen otters on most occasions. There have been two families, a bitch with two cubs and a bitch with three, plus a dog otter. The last time I was there, two otters were playing in front of the hide. Just as I was wondering where they fitted in to the scheme of things being just the two, I suddenly heard the distinctive otter whistle, and that was mum (enter stage right) calling to her offspring. This was just amazing, being close enough to watch and hear these wonderful creatures really was just something else. They all played together for sometime before swimming off (stage left), and out of sight. The cubs are now almost as big as her and I guess will soon be thinking about independent life and University and all that stuff!

I make no apologies for getting emotional (yes I did it again) I feel privileged to share these fleeting moments in the company (albeit from a distance) of my favourite mammal.

So, thank you to Philippa, (read the book, it's great) and to pot noodles, the aroma played a huge part obviously!!

I just need to have a glimpse of "my boy" on the bit of the Brue that I survey, and I will really be happy. The odd tear again if that happens? You bet!