

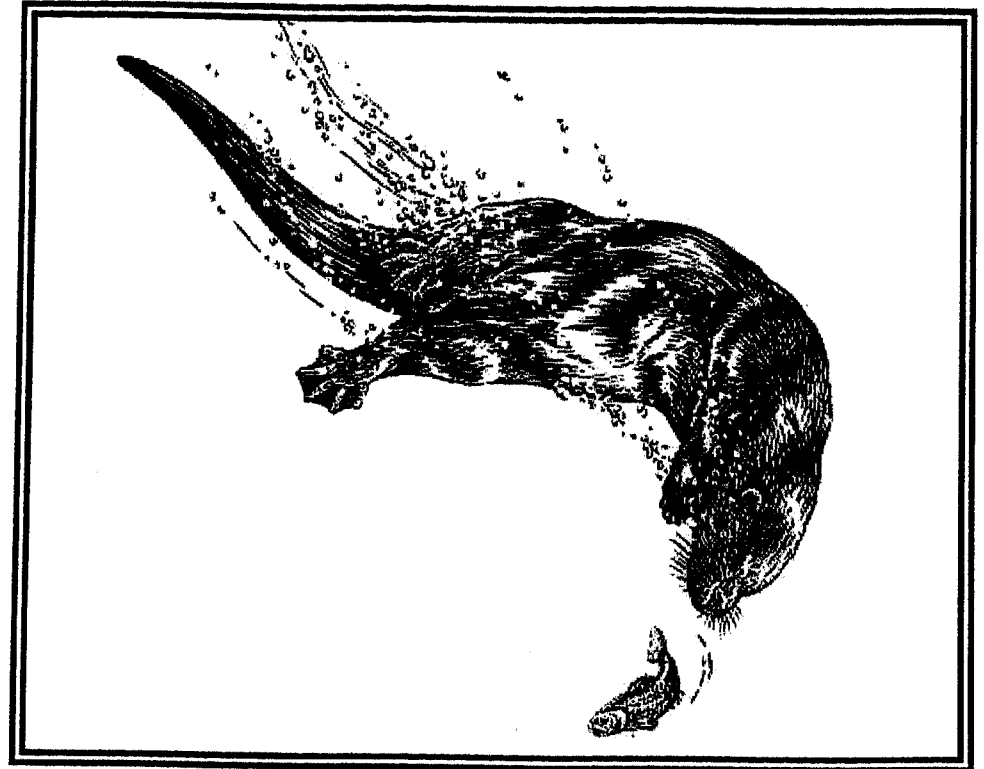
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Somerset Wildlife Trust Otter Group

NEWSLOTTER 22

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Patrick McCormack

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John Dixon

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EDITORIAL

Dear Member -

Welcome to the Spring edition of the Somerset Otter Group's Newsletter. Our new area arrangements worked well last year, and hopefully will bear fruit again in a few months time. In addition to the usual advice, guidance and encouragement from James Williams, this edition has accounts of two otter-hunts in very different locations: Shapwick and Botswana! Read, enjoy and imagine the contrast ..

Enclosed you will find the new recording form and a copy of the Fisheries leaflet, produced in partnership with Somerset Wildlife. Both are described below.

Best wishes and good ottering!

John

IMPORTANT ARRANGEMENTS

THIS YEAR'S TWO-DAY EVENT will be on Sat. 6th and Sun. 7th May. Use the special form, which you should send to James Williams, Stoford Manor, West Buckland, Wellington, TA21 9LS. Also enter the Saturday results on your Quarterly form, as your monthly check, but do not delay sending the 2-day result until the end of the quarter. (Last year, some results for the search in late April were sent in October!) If you cannot do your patch on these dates, or nearly so, please let us know, so that we can try to cover them.

NEW FORMS: Karen Coxon has given the forms a very thorough consideration and revised them to be user friendly for both the surveyor and SERC. A master copy is enclosed; we suggest you enter your sites and then make four copies, one for each quarter. Retain the masters for next year. Thanks to all who have made helpful suggestions over this. The records centre cannot yet receive them direct by electronic transfer, so traditional post will have to do.

E-MAIL: We have no idea how many of you would prefer this form of communication. If you do, send an email through your machine to Patrick McCormack, our Membership Secretary: Contact him on: patrick@kinkajouknowhow.co.uk. Rest assured, these email addresses will be treated as confidential and not be released to 3rd parties.

THE AXE(S) SURVEYS are to be on Sat. 8th April and Sat. 14th Oct. The aim is to cover the whole river in great detail again. If anybody else wants to help, or to go out with a more experienced surveyor to brush up on what to look for, there's lots of room.

OTHER SPECIES: We are not doing very well in recording other species on our forms. This is not just for general interest, or to share the aesthetic thrill of seeing a kingfisher. Things like dipper, kingfisher, water vole, water shrew, mink, crayfish etc are indicative of the general health of the water environment, and our surveyors constitute a valuable resource in investigating this.

AUTUMN MEETING

VIC SIMPSON'S TALK

Sixty-three people came to the Victory Inn for the autumn meeting. Vic Simpson, the veterinary pathologist who examines all our dead otters, gave a fascinating talk on what he has discovered over the last 17 years of increasing otter deaths. He now sees about 70 a year, of which 82% are road casualties. Deaths on the road follow a seasonal pattern, and reflect the hours of daylight and darkness, but cars are not the main cause of mortality.

Fighting seems to be a much more significant factor; over half the dead otters in the last five years have had recent, open, bite wounds, females as much as males. Ten percent of otters are dying from wounds sustained in fights, and their effect is contributing to many other deaths. Vic is starting to conclude that this increasing phenomenon is connected to breeding. The high incidence of inflicted deaths is skewing his figures on the prevalence of several other serious problems, such as kidney stones (present in 30% of otters recently), and dental lesions, (now in nearly 50%, and increasing).

There is some good news of course. Pollutants such as DDT and dieldrin are falling, and the levels of PCB have flattened out. Against this, gender-benders are an increasing anxiety.

Finally he gave a summary of the process leading up to the discovery last year of the new parasite. This gall-bladder fluke is new to Britain, and seems to be confined to the Somerset Levels at present. In its native rivers in eastern Europe it is a serious nuisance, and infects many species, including cats, dogs and humans.

We are very grateful to such a busy man for giving us his time and expertise. He has almost completed the formal report into all his research and findings from the 445 otters he has investigated, and this will be compelling reading when it comes out in May. But we do not need to wait until then to realise that the Somerset Otter group's input has been of great value, and that we must continue to support this research and, as important, to continue to monitor our otter population to ascertain what effect the new threat may have on it.

PUBLICATIONS TO WATCH FOR:

.. our very own Fisheries Pamphlet! With luck, it will be ready in time to send it out with this Newsletter. SOG and SWT have combined to produce basic information for fishery owners to help them cope with any problems the otters may pose. Please help us to get it to those affected. It will help them, and also the otters.

Vic Simpson's report on all his findings is due to be ready in early May, from the Environment Agency. He has just had a paper published in the Veterinary Record about the bite wounds he has found in our otters.

A revised and updated guide to the bones and bits to be found in spraints is now available from the Mammal Society. There is a lot of scope for this sort of research

in Somerset, if anybody is interested. We have fast salmonid rivers adjacent to slow lowland coarse fish moors, with chalk water coming off the limestone of the Mendips just beyond, and all these are well ottered. A fascinating opportunity to make some original comparisons, and not too difficult. All you need is a kitchen sieve and some Nappysan.

Dr Rafael Miranda has been doing some similar work on parts of the Levels, and his results should be ready soon, as should those of the Royal Holloway College's investigation of the Mink population of the levels.

Due to finish in April is the study by the SERC trainees, brilliantly led by Jodey Peyton, into the effects on the Tone otters of all the disturbance associated with the engineering work for the Silk Mills bridge and the massive Park and Ride scheme. The draft report on their findings so far is a very neat piece of work, and the final product should be of some significance.

TV: Charlie Hamilton James and Phillipa Forrester have now completed their otter film based around Tarka and the Torridge. It will appear in the autumn; not to be missed, with amazing shots of wild otters behaving as if they had never heard of Charlie.

WHAT ARE OTTERS FOR?

Not long ago, three people from the village of Bishops Hull, one of whom I knew slightly, rang me up to ask for my urgent assistance. They were each concerned that a planning application had been put in to turn a derelict slaughter house and hide tannery into a go-kart track for children. The smelly and unlovely knackers yard was housed in an especially graceless set of mill buildings on the banks of the Tone, and they therefore sought my immediate indignation on behalf of the otters which they believed might possibly, and conveniently, be living there.

The site is a long way out of the village. No protest had ever been raised about the possible impact of the hide business on the otters. Nor had anybody expressed any concern when the bypass to their village wiped out a known breeding holt for the construction of a bridge. That was fine by them.

But now that there was the prospect of the lorry park being used for something noisy and distasteful, they wanted to use any otters there might be as weapons. But unless there was to be all night racing right on the river bank, the change of use of the tracks and parking areas would hardly be noticed by the otters. This is not the first instance of this sort of manipulation. And most emphatically it is not what otters are for.

NEWS ITEMS

- We are sorry to lose the invaluable support of Russell and Sara Gomm, who have moved back north to the westernmost end of Hadrian's Wall.
- Ian Woodrow has returned to Buckingham.
- Chris Pidler now lives up near Gordano, so cannot be as active as before.

- Colin Seddon, who many will remember from his RSPCA days, has moved to Clewer, and will survey up there.
- We welcome Pamela Sellars who will do the middle bit of the Isle.
- Despite dry weather, and some observer absence, the Stoford Otter Loo recorded a record year for visits. 81 days out of 321 were positive; that is 25%. August's score was an amazing 50%. It would be good to get comparable scores from as many of you as possible. Start today!
- 27 dead otters were logged in 2005, only half of which made it to Vic.
- At least 17 different instances of breeding were reported.
- There is a plan to eradicate mink along a cordon from the Levels to the Axe. Co-ordinated by Robin Marshall-Ball, of BASC, the main beneficiaries are intended to be the water voles. Over 230 have been trapped so far, mainly in the Levels and moors.
- A dead Polecat was found near Catcott, a new species for us to look out for.
- The Highways Dept is installing a culvert at the Beer Wall black spot for road deaths near Othery.
- Despite the activities on the Sheppey of the EA's pioneers with their chainsaws and excavators, inspection of the Woodford House Otter Loo reveals that otters have returned quickly to their old haunts.

OTTERING IN AFRICA - James Williams

On our wildlife safari holiday to Botswana we set our guide a challenge. We wanted to see, in addition to all the bog-standard hippos, elephants, lions and antelopes, four especial creatures: Wild Dog, Pel's Fishing Owl, and the two species of otter, Cape Clawless and Spot-necked. He blanched. Wild dogs are very rare, and each pack covers such an enormous range, using a den only briefly in the breeding season, that finding them is a matter of chance. Little is known about the fishing owl because it is secretive during the day, and the rivers and lake shores are scary places from dusk onwards, what with the hippos and crocodiles etc. This is also why the two otters are so little studied; it tends to be expensive on research assistants.

But as our boldness matched our ignorance, off we went. We went first to where the Okovango flows into the Delta. But boat trips there, and on the mighty Zambesi upstream of the Victoria Falls, failed to produce any otter signs. It is all very different from the Tone. One is warm, for a start. And most of the little bits of driftwood that look just like a crocodile's head and eyes are in fact crocs that look just like bits of driftwood. You need a torch in the island camps to make sure you do not trip over a grazing hippo on your way back from supper to your cabin. They have a sort of matt finish to their paintwork which makes them very hard to spot after dusk.

It is best on the morning boat trip, when the hippos are coming back into the water, and the crocs basking for warmth alongside the pools. All the exotic birds are busy getting in a shift of activity before the day gets too hot, and now that they can see what they are doing the antelopes are coming for a drink before seeking out some shade. Lots of lovely things to see, but no otters. We did find a Pel's Owl though, a vast, Buzzard-sized, orange bird, coming back off the lake at dawn, and making its way on enormously broad wings from tree to tree along the island, to reach a sufficiently dark corner to roost away the day.

Then we moved south, and took to our tents, camping under trees along the edge of the Chobe and Khwai rivers, to experience the concentrations of game drawn to the water at the end of the long and exceptionally severe dry season. A leopard, 2 species of jackal, lions and lots of hyaenas by day, and servals, honey badgers and wild cats by night. Graceful antelopes and amazing birds everywhere, so we almost did not care too much that there were no otters. Almost. The wild dogs turned up in camp one morning, six just hunting through, so we followed in the Landcruiser until their impala crossed the river and escaped. Another lot ambled on a short cut through another campsite in the late evening, when we were showering. We rapidly got our cameras on, if little else; photographic exposure in every sense. That pack had a half grown pup with them, and seemed to have fed. Finally, on our last morning, we found eight adults and eight big pups lying in the shade of some trees, just asking to be photographed.

So that just left the Spot-necked Otters. We took a boat out on a reedy series of lagoons on our last afternoon, to explore a tiny corner of the vastness of the Delta, which is about the size of Wales. Dense walls of reeds come right to the water's edge, and there seemed to be no land or shore that we could see, and 100 km of similar stuff ahead of us. The others were enjoying the birds and the scene, and I was scanning and scanning. But no need to scan, suddenly there they were, a family of 3, fishing under some waterlily-type plants, quite close to our boat. Two adults and a cub, rather smaller than our otter, and with a very different head, more bulgy round the eyes, and with a shorter, blunt muzzle. The breeze drifted our boat closer, so the adults stopped pursuing the small fish they were after, and had a good look at us, which allowed us to see their distinctive necks. Then they took junior with them up a creek back into the dense reed beds. We thought that might be the last we would see of them, but no, the two adults re-emerged and fished on, gradually moving away and drawing us after them, to the mouth of another inlet, into which they disappeared, presumably to go back to their cub, and to move away from our intrusion.

A wonderful finale to a wonderful holiday, with 45 species of mammal and 252 species of bird. And, as Cape Clawless Otter is still to play for, every incentive to go back again.

THE TOUGH TALE OF A TONE OTTER

In mid-February an otter was reported from a very small stream at West Monkton, near Taunton. By the time I got there the next week it had had 9 out of 10 tame ducks in a smallish pond, and had been seen eating one of them while being watched by the baffled dogs, which were obviously unsure what to do. It seemed very small and thin, and probably unwell, so the RSPCA were called. They were unable to extract it from a small culvert where it had taken refuge, so they put out some mackerel for it and left it.

Ungratefully, it left the fish and moved on. It was then seen near Ruishton, and noticed to be lame. On 1st March it was eating an eel in Firepool, by Taunton Market, in broad daylight. It was so lame that an EA worker nearly caught it, (I wonder if they are insured against bites.) In mid-April it was seen limping past the windows of A C Mole's new offices at Blackbrook, from where it made its way up the little stream into Lisieux Way. Here the RSPCA finally cornered it in a garden, and took it to their hospital at West Hatch. It had a bad ulcer on a leg. The vets made excellent progress in promoting the healing of this wound, and the poor thin little creature soon started to put on weight.

Ungrateful again, it started to devote all its newfound energies into breaking out, so much so that it was damaging its muzzle and its pads to an extent that was worrying to the vets. So it was moved into an outside pen, with grass rather than hard flooring. From which it escaped the first night.

About a week later Dennis Pavey picked up a small bitch otter on the A378, which went fresh to Vic. Vic rang me to say that it had been a most unusual and interesting case. In addition to lung lesions, and a fluke-infested gall bladder, it had a weird lack of coat, a bitten eye, ruined feet, and no whiskers left on its muzzle. It was run over 6.5 km from West Hatch.

Although still only an immature in size, internal examination revealed that it had given birth to no fewer than 6 cubs, although there was no sign of her having suckled them successfully. For one so young, it had been an exciting and eventful life.

PLAYING OTTERS AT SHAPWICK HEATH - Jodey Peyton

I am a member of the trainee team at SERC. We regularly survey for otters, but none of us had ever seen one in the wild. However, on hearing that there are regular sightings at Shapwick heath Nature reserve we mobilised a car load of trainees for a dawn stake-out at one of the hides.

We got up at 5am sharp, and, feeling rather hazy, packed ourselves, biscuits and thermos into my little car and made the 20-odd mile trip to Shapwick. It was a beautiful sunrise, and the low hanging mist over the levels was worth the early start alone! We parked and walked up to the hide, the anticipation building as we went. On arrival at Noah's Hide, we set up base and waited, each of us scanning the beautiful water expectantly.

After about half an hour, Jenny spotted the otters over on the other side of the lake. We all sat enthralled as the otters (probably cubs) played around in the water for at least 45 minutes. They were moving through the water like porpoises; they would duck under the water for a short time and resurface and roll around with each other. It was amazing to be able to watch these wonderful, energetic creatures play so freely. We were very lucky to see such uninhibited play, and for such a long time.

We also saw, amongst the swans, cormorants and little egrets, a hobby, perched in one of the dead trees, where we watched it for a good 20 minutes. There was also a hunting kingfisher, its distinctive blue-green body shimmering in the early morning summer sun. All in all, we had a fantastic morning up at Shapwick Heath. The variety of wildlife was brilliant, and the otters just topped off the morning perfectly.

OLDER THAN WE THOUGHT

The perennial problem of deciding just how ancient some of one's longer lasting sprints may be has just gone into a new dimension.

The remarkable fossil bones of a fur-covered swimming mammal that lived in the age of the dinosaurs 164 million years ago have been discovered in China. The animal appears to have been more than a foot long and weighed nearly two pounds, with a tail like a beaver, and seal-like teeth clearly adapted for catching and eating fish. The rocks encasing the fossil skeleton bore the clear imprint of the dense hairs that had covered its body when it died in the mud. Its discoverers named their find *Castorocauda Lutrasimilis*, and said it must have resembled a modern river otter.

This discovery has raised a wave of excitement among scientists whose timetable for mammalian evolution has just been pushed back by 100 million years. (From *The San Francisco Chronicle*.)

**** STOP PRESS ** ... VERY IMPORTANT NEWS ... TWO CASES OF BILE FLUKE FOUND IN OTTERS IN NORFOLK ... ** ENDS ****

The detection of this new 'nasty', even though it is on the other side of the country, emphasises that we should continue to keep our eyes peeled for any evidence for its presence in non-fluke areas such as Somerset.

Parallel to this and nearer to home, the drop in dead otters recovered in Cornwall is a worrying development - are otters dying elsewhere, of new causes, and not on the roads? So please redouble your efforts to collect dead otters for Vic Simpson and the pathology programme. This is really the only way to establish the true causes of mortality and the state of health of our otter population.