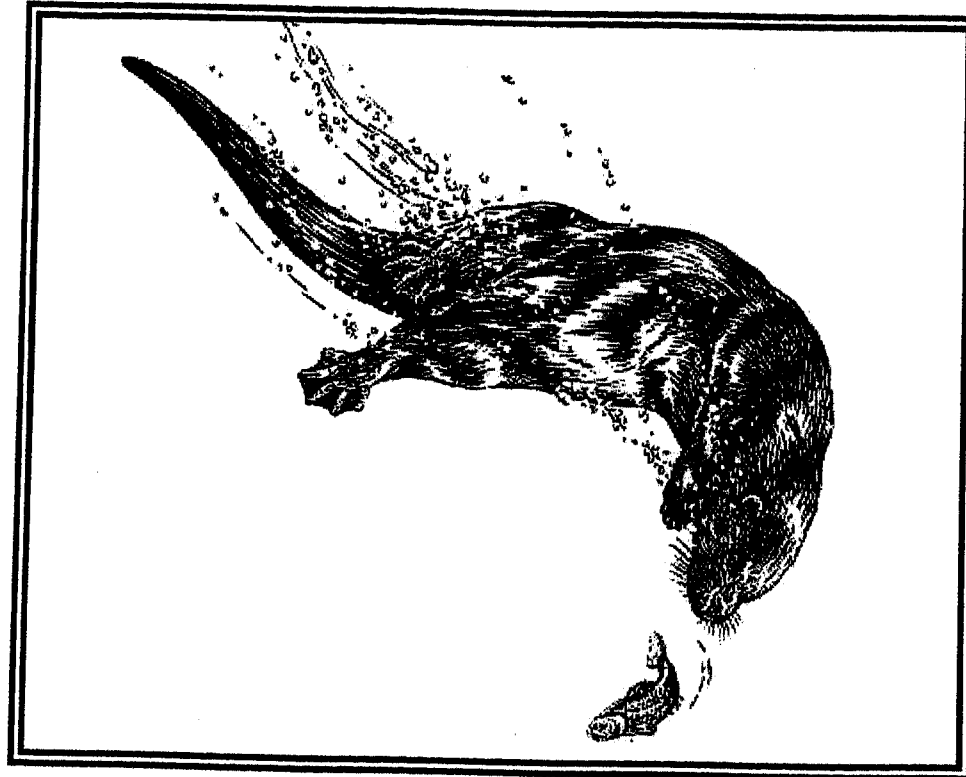




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Somerset Wildlife Trust Otter Group

NEWSLOTTER 23

September 2006



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John Dixon

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ENVIRONMENT AGENCY
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EDITORIAL

Dear Member -

The autumn **Newsletter**, as usual, brings you the results of the Two Day Event earlier this year. There are also items on other Group activities, particularly along the Barle and Axe, together with numerous morsels of otter-related news.

Best wishes

Patrick

NEXT MEETING, October 30, 2006:

Charlie Hamilton James - stories, tales and film

hot(?or frozen?) from his stint in Shetland for 'Springwatch', with details of the true nature of nasty Buster, and the realities of family life for an otter, possibly also with preview clips of his next BBC Wildlife on One film, 'On The Trail of Tarka', to be screened in the autumn.

Amazing footage of a wild otter passing undetected under a fisherman's rod. No wonder we seldom see them, and no wonder James catches so few fish.

To be held at **The Victory Inn**, Allerford, near Norton Fitzwarren, grid reference ST183249 at 7pm. All welcome - please complete and return the form on the last page of this **Newsletter** to John Dixon.

QUARTERLY RETURNS

IMPORTANT NOTICE: Please be exact in sending your records sheets to SERC, promptly at the end of every quarter. Each of you is down on the list as covering a set patch, and it makes the database very much less useful if there are colossal gaps. Karen has produced a map of all the records for the last twelve months, which is enclosed. Please check it now to see that your contributions are included. Karen has also 'tweaked' the record sheet - a new master is enclosed for your use.

This incompleteness has made it pretty well impossible to resolve problems of new members inadvertently overlapping with bridges already surveyed by somebody else. We intend to repeat the series of local meetings next spring, so that everybody can liaise properly and increase the efficiency of the group.

Can we stress that what you do as a member of the Somerset Otter Group is very much more than an amusing hobby. As the next section shows, you are contributing to a serious study of a rare animal at a time of renewed crisis for that species. Your records form part of a unique and unrivalled series going back unbroken to the early 1970's. We have a real responsibility to keep up this good work.

STOP PRESS: GLOOM. There has been a sudden surge in otter deaths, seven in a month from 17th July, and six of them within a small radius around Huntspill, north of Bridgwater. Quite why there has been such a cluster, and why it has occurred at this time of year, which is normally a period when very few deaths are

recorded, is a mystery. We can only hope that Vic Simpson's post mortems will not unzip some sinister cause, and that it is just a hideous coincidence.

GROUP ACTIVITIES

It has been a busy and successful time for the Otter group. We have several new members, although sadly one or two previous members seem just to have dropped away, which is a pity, especially as some of them were/are strategically sited.

The collaborative survey of the River Axe was a success again, and is to be repeated on 7th October. The annual Two Day Event went well, in fine weather as usual, and more people than ever before took part. Next year's event is to be on 28th and 29th April: adjust your holiday bookings now! I suggest we repeat the series of local meetings next spring, to set this up.

You should all have had a copy of the pamphlet 'Otters in Somerset' which will, we hope, help with the problem of otters preying on fishery stocks. A national, longer, version of similar advice for fish owners is in draft form at present; no indication of a possible publication date.

Vic Simpson's report on the post-mortem investigations is at the printers. The Otter group has again been active in this ongoing and important research programme. Vic has identified the white amoeba-like creatures found alive in spraints in two parts of the county. Reassuringly, they are a gut parasite of fish, and do not harm the otters. A team from the BBC programme, Inside Outside, has been to film him, and also been to the Levels, to follow up the progress of the bile fluke in the otters.

The Otter Group has been supplying spraints for diet analysis by a Spanish scientist working with CEFAS; his report is also in preparation.

Three training walks have been held. The one on the Tone for the new trainees at SERC has become an annual event. There was not as much evidence as usual, because of the low water, but enough to give everybody a flavour. The first on Exmoor, organised by the foxhounds supporters club, found a superb amount of very fresh work on the Barle. At the second one, for the staff of Exmoor National Park, the water was very low, and the signs were not as fresh, but we did find some padding, quite a rare occurrence up there, because of lack of mud. All the indications were that the otters had gone upstream to the headwater marshes, to sit out the drought. From this walk we recruited several new surveyors, so now have every patch on our side of Exmoor covered.

Theoretically, next year is the correct date for the fifth repeat of the National Otter Survey. As yet there is no positive indication whether funding will permit it to go ahead, to continue the "every seven years" pattern, nor whether it will be surveyed by professionals or amateurs. I can see no point in waiting for DEFRA and the EA to get their act together sufficiently to come to a crisp decision, so I propose that we in Somerset repeat the survey. Since the last one we have discovered the fluke, so it would be a good chance to reassess our otter population against the previous

results, which were collected before its arrival, to see if there is any effect of the new parasite.

Much of the information required can be taken from our regular monthly surveys. These are proving very useful in several ways; for instance, the County Council and the Environment Agency consult them regularly, which makes it important to get your quarterly record sheets in promptly. There was some inconvenience caused recently by areas being six months out of date.

So, in summary, we should congratulate ourselves on what a lot we have accomplished, and be excited at what exciting things we can achieve.

TWO-DAY EVENT 2006

Sixty members of the Somerset Otter Group completed their annual two day survey of the rivers of the county in early May. The water was very low, and, despite the dry spring, they were in some areas hampered by the spring growth of riverside vegetation

They recorded 65 stretches of river and looked at 271 sites, 197 of which had some evidence of otter activity. This is a score of 73%, very similar to last year's result of 69%. 35 of the patches produced "Hits", (fresh evidence on Day Two), and there were six "Near Misses", (fresh work on Day One in an area where no fresh evidence was to be found the next day). 34% of the positive sites gave a Hit.

As usual these were entered on a map, and then adjudicated to reveal the presence of the home range of 31 adult otters, possibly 33 with a more generous interpretation. Last year we claimed 39 ranges. These are minimum scores, and we assume that each range holds only one otter, which is often the case. But to enable comparison between one year and the next the assumption is that each set of freshly positive sites is only one otter, even when the amount of evidence points to more than one, as it did at Clatworthy Reservoir this year.

Three otters were seen this year, by John Crispin, by Mary Leizers, who got up especially early to try to see it, and one fast asleep by Shelley Saltman and Dion Warner. Six Mink were recorded, four Water Voles, seven Dippers, two Little Egrets and four Kingfishers.

Inevitably, there were some gaps in our coverage, and there may well have been other otters on the East Lyn, the top of the Exe, the Washford, near Cannington, on the Huntspill and the Cary. Smaller streams which often hold an otter, but may not have done perhaps at a time of such low flows include the top of the Yeo, the Ding, the Fivehead, and the short stretches of the Yarty, the Culm and the Otter which are in Somerset. In addition there are otters on the eastern streams that flow to the Bristol Avon; this is an area where the Otter Group is under-represented.

If all of these added another otter, our score would increase by 12, plus whatever there is to be found on the Avon. Last year a similar adjustment gave us a putative maximum of 50 ranges, almost exactly the same.

The pattern and the density of the results on the map show a considerable similarity to our results from previous years. It appears that our method is consistent, and valid, in that the monthly surveys do not reveal any major differences. It is an exercise well worth continuing, and if possible expanding, to fill in the gaps.

MINK

Please keep recording these undesirable imports. Mervyn Newman has been given a contract from South Devon council to co-ordinate a methodical zapping of all mink from this area. The idea is to form a cordon across the Parrett/Axe line, and eliminate all the mink. This line was last used defensively in the war, when it was fortified against a possible landing of German troops in the west, as a left hook preliminary to an invasion by Hitler. If Mervyn proves as effective as the Home Guard, it should allow the Water Voles to work their way back from Dorset

into Devon and Cornwall, where they are completely extinct. (One was seen last year on the Teign, but there has been no sign of it since.) The word in the pubs is that mink, although much less plentiful than a dozen years ago, are making a bit of a comeback from their recent very sparse level.

BIRTHS AND DEATHS

Eighteen deaths in the book to 24th July, two of which were just outside Somerset. Ten of them have gone to Vic Simpson for post-mortem. This programme continues to produce important results, the principle one for us being the spread of the bile fluke. An infected otter was found near Exeter, and others in Dorset. There have also been two cases from East Anglia.

The saddest case was the two killed together near Kingston St Mary, just outside Taunton. A driver injured a bitch otter. While she was trying to cope, another otter approached which she shoed away. She went to get the RSPCA. When they came there was a dead otter, so they removed it. Meanwhile Margaret Davis reported the death, and a friend went out, and collected the body for post-mortem scheme, not knowing that the RSPCA had been to the scene. It was not until the next morning that we realised that the big dog cub, (larger than his mother), had come back to look for her and also been killed.

There must have been a third cub. The day before these deaths, a report came in of predation on fish in a garden pond right up on the top of the Quantocks at the very source of the stream. The owners were amazed that otters would go so far up such a small water. The damage pointed to a family invasion. The next night, the two were killed farther down the same stream. The third night, the pond got done again, so there was at least one survivor.

Eighteen deaths is exactly the same number as last year for the same period. Yet earlier the Wildlife Trusts of Cornwall and Devon were so worried at the fall off in bodies that they put out a press release to remind the public to hand them in. We had to rewrite it for Somerset!

There have been many fewer litters of cubs reported this year than last. It is to be hoped that this is a result of the low water levels, and that things will pick up when the monsoon beaks. Other possibilities are that consecutive dry summers have reduced the fish populations, or that pollutants like sheep dip have removed much of the invertebrate food of the fish, so that the bitches do not reach breeding condition.

Whatever the cause, it is important that we try to keep a good record of cub production. With such a mobile animal the only way to quantify the size and health of the population is to record the spacing and frequency of bitches made stationary by their litters.

Three lucky cubs were rescued at Gold Corner in January, and are now doing very well in their custom built enclosure at Secret World, where they are being kept as

wild as possible. Ellie West, their minder, tells me that they had two others in, from Devon, and that these are now in the orphanage in the New Forest. This is where the cub rescued from the diesel spill on the Axe went, but sadly, after making good progress for some months, he suddenly died of the after-effects.

What is worrying is that diesel is still being intermittently released, and the EA cannot trace it. It doesn't make any difference that it is only a thin surface film; the damage is done when the otter grooms itself and licks it off. And very young cubs are reported from farther down the Axe recently, a short distance up an undieseled side stream. What will happen when they progress to the main river? Three small cubs were seen in January, being called across the South Drain at Shapwick, but the recent reports are of only one.

AXE VALLEY OTTER SURVEY - APRIL 2006

This was the third annual check of the whole of the catchment of the river Axe by a team of a dozen volunteers from the three counties involved, Devon, Dorset and Somerset. The method used was again that suggested in the LIFE Natura programme as suitable for comparison between Special Areas of Conservation.

This year 90 of the 102 sites checked had evidence of the presence of an otter, which is 88%. In the two previous surveys the score was 74%. It is doubtful whether this represents any form of increase in the distribution of otters in the catchment. It is more probable that it reflects the dry spring, during which old signs were not washed away by increases in water level.

There was a slight difference in our method from the two previous checks, in that each surveyor visited his sites on one day only, instead of two consecutive days. There has to be an assumption, therefore, that any interpretation of results based on the freshness of the evidence is as accurate as before. With a two day check there is no doubt about the newness of an overnight spraint; on a single visit there is an element of judgment required. (There is always an assumption about the ability of the observer to distinguish otter evidence from mink signs, etc., accurately!)

The survey revealed nine 'Not Dry' spraints and eight 'Anal Jellies'. Under the conditions of dryness obtaining at the time of the survey it is a fair assumption that an Anal Jelly is fresh evidence, and this is born out by the fact that only one of them did not fit into the pattern of the fresh spraints. Plotted onto the map these results show a minimum of five animals and a maximum of seven. Last year we scored six, or possibly 11, and the year before six or nine. As one adult was killed four days before our survey the scores are remarkably similar.

Under the rules of this game each cluster of evidence can count as only one animal, even if we know that cubs are present, as we do this year for the Drimpton/Clapton area. What we are attempting is a check on the number of established adults on the Axe system. It is beginning to look as if about eight would constitute a full house. Which makes especially interesting the carnage of the year 2000, when six adults

were killed on the system, one of them a lactating bitch. For the third year running we have failed to find an otter at home on the whole of the Yarty; this may be a seasonal effect. And there was no evidence of an otter at the top of the Coly and Offwell tributaries, nor up the Corry.

But apart from these, there was evidence throughout the system, and the pattern of the clusters of fresh work indicates that the method of searching works well, and that after three years we are in a position to give a very informed estimate of the carrying capacity of the Axe system, and of the actual otter population. Now that the new Bile-fluke has spread out of the Somerset Levels, this may, sadly, prove to be very useful information in assessing the effect of this disease on the otter population.

MEETINGS

Somerset County Council hosted a well-attended and useful meeting for Planners and Highways staff. Three mitigations have been started since then.

Somerset Trust held a useful seminar for all specialist groups, when ideas were brainstormed on what the Trust could do for the specialists, and what the specialists could offer the Trust. This is to be followed up by a meeting to crystallise what affiliation means to them. Less successful was their Group Fair at Fyne Court, held at the request of the local reserves managers, who then did not turn up. There is to be an Open Day at Wells on 24th Sept, when we hope to put up our display boards. Volunteers to explain on our behalf are needed.

NEW FOREST OTTERS

The manager of this very interesting collection has offered to give the Otter Group a conducted tour. I suggest we arrange this at the autumn meeting.

All the orphan cubs from round here go to this well-appointed facility, which houses three species of otter and most of the British mustelids, as well as other fascinating forms of wildlife relevant to Britain. If enough people want to go, we could have a bus. It takes just over two hours from Taunton. **Highly recommended.**

WEB SITE

One of our most enthusiastic, and youngest, members, James Blackwell is setting up a website called www.ottersinsomerset.piczo.com. Although still in its formative stages, this could be a very useful means of communicating and giving feedback more quickly than the infrequent publication of these **Newsletters**, which are inevitably somewhat dated by the time they arrive on your doormats.

DAILY RECORDING

A new member, Jillie Leonard, is going to record the activity through her garden on the Hawkcombe. This brings us up to six daily recorders. I am sure that this is potentially the most valuable of our activities.

FEATHERS

Another new member, Danny de la Hey, is undertaking a study of the contents of the spraints in and around the bird reserve out on the Levels at Shapwick and Ashcott. The main aim is to ascertain to what extent the otters are taking birds, particularly young waterfowl. Feathers in the spraints will be taken down and used as incriminating evidence for the birdwatchers' increasing allegations that otters are reducing the annual production of young. This will become his dissertation for his university degree.

That they do have some birds is established. What will be interesting will be the extent to which it is seasonal, or whether it is related to cubs taking an easier option than elusive, slippery fish while they are learning their trade. Last summer, when the complaints were made most forcibly, there were two litters of cubs right by the bird hides: I saw eight different otters one early morning. Or perhaps some individual adult otters develop a preference; at the New Forest Orphanage they feed minced beef with cod liver oil and vitamins, as well as fish, to the growing youngsters. Many of the adults always eat that option before their fish.

Another factor could be the massive decline in the eel population. And there must be a considerable contribution to the problems of being a juvenile waterbird from all the avian predators, Marsh Harriers, Black-backed Gulls, Crows and co. This could be a fascinating study, and it shows the scope that there is for exploring the lifestyle of our otters, as well as just recording their presence. Of immediate value would be a comparative study from a less bird-rich area.

STARTER PACK

A new members' introductory leaflet is to be produced. You will all get a copy, regardless of how long you have been roaming the river banks. Meanwhile, please be aware that your ankles are as frail as anybody else's, and that one slip could lead to a sprained ankle, which, if you are wet through, could lead to hypothermia, and that.....So, always carry a stick to stop you slipping and sliding, and always let somebody know where you are going and when you should get back.

NEW OTTER BOOK

David Chaffe, the author of 'Stormforce', is about to publish a new book of his memoirs, called 'Face to Face with Nature'. Get down to your local bookshop and view or request a copy.

