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EDITORIAL

Dear Member -

Spring may have taken an intermission as this Newsletter goes to press, but you will see that we should be girding ourselves for this year's Two Day Event. More details below ..

Can I make a small plea for members' contributions? The current format of Newsletter hasn't been completely filled by James and my scribbles so please, if you have any stories, experiences or observations, do send them to me for inclusion in the next issue. No literary skills required!

Best wishes

Patrick

TWO-DAY EVENT 28TH - 29TH APRIL.

THE SPECIAL SURVEY FORM IS ENCLOSED.

Complete your site details now, and if you cannot take part, post it in at once so that we can arrange cover.

When you do take part, remember to include negative results, that is sites without evidence, and to return the form promptly. The scores will be needed for the Fluke Conference.

SOMERSET OTTER SURVEYS 2006

There are strong indications that 2006 was a year of a considerable decline in the Otter population of Somerset. These statistics indicate more than a natural blip in the records. Records of deaths show:

Somerset	6 years	22.6
	2006	41
	Increase	81.4%

Broken down by catchments, two show an unusual result:

R. Parrett	6yr average	7.5
	2006	19
R.Brue	6yr average	2.8
	2006	8

These two catchments are adjacent, and together form the Somerset Levels, the area where the Bile Fluke was first found, and to which it was until 2006 mainly restricted. In July, normally a month of few deaths, (V.I.C) we recorded seven dead otters in a five mile radius at the bottom of these two catchments.

The number of otters submitted from all areas to V.I.C. for post mortem was up this year by almost 50%. (V.I.C. Newsletter) This year there was not the usual summer fall-off in deaths. (Vic Simpson, personal communication).

FREQUENCY RECORDING Two people keep daily records on distinct tributaries of the R.Tone. The result is the percentage of days checked/checkable which were positive for the presence of an otter.

Stoford Manor	5 year average	21%
	previous 2 yrs' average	28%
	2006	12%
	decline from 5 yr avg	-42%
Bishop's Lydeard	from 2 yr avg	-58%
	4yr average	36%
	2006	22%
	Decline	-40%

Deaths in 2007

The early indications are that the problems continue. Somerset had seven deaths in January, and Dorset was alarmed to have six in the first three weeks of this year. Further daily checks would help clarify the matter

SOMERSET OTTER GROUP: Spring Meetings

It is proposed that the Somerset Otter Group should again hold local meetings by catchments.

Objectives

- To revise the coverage of the rivers and streams, so that we have as strong a return as is possible for this year's Two-day Event on 28/29th April.
- To identify any major gaps, so that we can arrange cover, or recruit a new member.

The figures for 2006 point to a big reversal in the fortunes of the Somerset otter population. Deaths were up from 23 to 41, with another four just over the county boundary. Some of this is attributable to the bile fluke, which spread significantly last year. We urgently need an accurate assessment of the current population to see if all this has had a measurable effect.

- To revise the administrative structure of the Somerset Otter Group.

The membership is now too large for it to be administered conveniently by one person. And the distances are too great for it to be sensible to do so; Simonsbath is virtually on a different planet from Farleigh Hungerford. Members north of Mendip have different problems from those on Exmoor. It will be more efficient if the local, catchment-based, sub-groups become virtually self sustaining.

Already some groups have held their meetings, with more planned in the near future. So if you want to know what's happening and have suggestions for how to improve the Group, do go along and make your contribution.

ENGINEERING IMPACT MEASURING

We have now monitored the effect of two major riverside schemes on the otters in the streams affected. Russell and Sara Gomm covered the major repairs to the M5 bridge below Taunton, and found that because the contractors took a few elementary precautions, the otters could carry on using the Tone as normal.

A group of trainees from SERC, led by Jodey Peyton and Emma Koblisek, did a 'before, during and after' check on the Silk Mills works, and produced a very well written report, which is to be published.

Somerset County Council has indicated that it will commission a similar study for the proposed schemes in central Taunton. At present we do not have anybody doing a comprehensive survey of the town; we need to find a team in time to see what the otters are doing for some months before the disruption starts.

FLUKE CONFERENCE

The Environment Department of the County Council is setting up a conference to pull together whatever expertise there is so far on the new bile fluke, and to focus attention on the need for a proper understanding of its biology and life cycle. This parasite has not had very long to establish itself, yet the initial indications are potentially disturbing. It is definitely spreading geographically, but has probably not yet reached its full potential density in any area.

Each creature has to be ingested with a meal by the otter or mink, so several of the dead otters have shown very slight infestations, indicating that most of their prey has been fluke-free. Other otters have had severe damage from a much large number of parasites, which indicates that the fluke can reach a dangerous density in local fish populations. Some people think that the fit otters with few fluke indicate that this is a problem the otters will be able to handle. I fear that things can only get worse as the fluke builds up its numbers.

Either way, we need to know whether our otters are doing alright. So, in addition to the Two-day Event, we will repeat the National survey.

FIFTH NATIONAL OTTER SURVEY

2007 is in theory the year when the fifth repeat of the National Otter Survey is due. It cannot now start before next year at the earliest, and may well not start even then, as the EA may not be able to fund it. So we propose to repeat the fixed method for our area this spring, so that the result can be compared with last time, and we will have a second check on the strength of our population.

The Two-day Event uses a different method, and relies to some extent on the judgement of the adjudicator. The NOS follows a set pattern each time and its figures are as strictly comparable as the vagaries of the weather can permit. In the beginning time and effort were saved by doing only the black squares on a chess

board division of the map of England. The centre of Somerset, from Dunster to Wells, is a white square, so was not covered in the first three surveys. But fortunately, James Williams and Sue Farrington did it last time anyway, for interest, so there is a statistic for comparison for the whole of the county.

FIGHTING

Vic Simpson has been very worried for some years about the frequency and viciousness of fighting among the otters of the South West. At one stage he said that it seemed probable that a Somerset otter would get bitten in a dispute about every three weeks. He has just done some analysis of the prevalence of wounds in the bodies he has received recently.

While they are snapping away still in the well established areas of Devon and Cornwall, and are duffing up immature otters on a regular basis in the emergent populations of the more recently colonised counties to our east, things have calmed down a lot recently in Somerset, and there is significantly less fighting. Wonder why?

REVIEWS

ON THE TELLY-BOX

The BBC's regional programme *Inside Outside West* did a good piece on the Dreaded Fluke. They went to the Levels, and filmed the EA electrofishing. Some of the Sunbleak they stunned were then carted off to the CEFAS labs at Weymouth and examined for the presence of the fluke's intermediate host. They found evidence of a parasite, but not the right one, just a fish problem. This programme was a sensible treatment of the new problem, which caught the attention of a wide section of the public, and has already resulted in more road deaths being reported.

Charlie Hamilton-James and Phillipa Forrester triumphed again with their Torridge-based, full length feature, "On the Trail of Tarka" (BBC2, Oct 25, 2006). If any of you missed this stunningly beautiful evocation of the spirit of Williamson's "Tarka the Otter", you must make every effort to catch the repeat when they screen it again, as they must do so. The filming of wild otters in action through the seasons, by day and by night, is superb; there are epic shots of all the ancillary river creatures too, and the whole film relates how Williamson's depiction of the life of the river is still being followed by the present generation of otters.

There is a video clip to be had at this website: <http://easyurl.net/7f078>. A broadband internet connection is required to see this comfortably.

"Wild Thing I Love You" (C4, Autumn 2006): The researcher came to look at a bridge on a tributary of the Tone for this programme, before deciding to work on a problem site in Northumberland. I had not realised just how much they wanted to throw money at the problem of a road crossing blackspot. Heavy machinery and

expensive materials added to the visual drama of the rescue work, but I was left with the feeling that it was rather disproportionate, even though they did have a major problem on a very dangerous road.

The programme seemed to take priority over the need, and the whole series must have been a bit discouraging to those volunteers who have to do their bit for the environment with a spade, some netting and a few fence posts. But the otters did not share my reservations: one ambled along their newly built ramp the very first evening, before they had had time to pack up and go home.

Go to Channel 4's website for more info on this series and the otter programme: <http://easyurl.net/251f8>.

IN PRINT

Prof. Hans Kruuk's "Otters, their behaviour, ecology and conservation", Oxford University Press, ISBN 0198565879. Affordable in paperback only, this is a comprehensive study of all the otters of the world, and gives an in depth understanding of their lives and difficulties. The main emphasis is on Scottish otters, where Kruuk has been based, but it is interesting to realise how our otters depart from the habits of other species, or conform. In my view his facts and opinions are rather too heavily influenced by the special circumstances of Shetland, his main study area, but he was able there to study them there to depths we will never aspire to, with our longer nights and wooded rivers. Highly recommended as a serious read for the deeply interested.

The word is that David Chaffe's long awaited autobiography is at last due to appear in April. David was the author of the very successful story of the orphan cub from the Tone which he reared, "Stormforce".

"All you own work." Well, not quite, but many of you have contributed enormously to the Post Mortem Programme, so can feel involved when Vic Simpson's Report rolls off the Environment Agency presses in April. Those of you who attended his talk recently will know that there will be a fascinating breadth of important and up to the date information. But perhaps the text and graphs will lack his slyly naughty sense of humour, so we may have to ask him back at some stage. If we do, and you haven't read his report, just think how ignorant you will look. This one is a MUST.

Beginner's Booklet: As you will recollect, the Somerset otter group intends to produce a comprehensive guide to otters and otter surveys, to be issued to all members for a small fee. This will cover the sadly now-obligatory health and safety requirements, and be a useful reference guide for contacts and procedures. The fee will be a one-off sub to our group, and give us a small financial base, which at present we lack. A grant has been obtained towards its production, so the long delay in its appearance should soon be at an end.

RIVER AXE(S)

Parts of this river are in Somerset, so ours. There will be another co-ordinated survey this spring, involving folk from all three counties. There was a lively and well supported meeting after the last one, at which some remarkable clips from an automatic camera set up in the bowels of a mill were shown. One otter was screaming with terror at another, much bigger, one, and cowering in a heap behind a metal grille. They are not nice animals; we must borrow the film for a meeting. The 2006 survey came up with much the same level of activity as before, so the diesel spill has not been too devastating.

The cub that was rescued from the diesel spill on the Axe died from its effects some months later, at the New forest orphanage. Moral: we must be very vigilant against pollution. James Williams went to Axminster in February, on one of those dreadful rainy days, to collect a beautiful and very fit young dog otter's corpse for post-mortem. On his way out of the town at noon he saw an otter drifting down the flood water in a happy and casual way.

ROAD MITIGATIONS

The Highways dept have been busy putting things right at East Lyng, where the damage caused by verge mowing to the reflectors resulted in the death of a bitch otter. There is a good scheme in place at the Beer Wall tilting weir. Something is planned at Wellington, and near Kingston St Mary, where we had two killed at once.

FOREIGN BODIES

Otters are present on almost all continents and we have seen at some past meetings examples of the different species and their habitats. You can experience some of these without having to experience jetlag, lost luggage, the midges or whatever else is thrown at the mildly adventurous traveller by visiting them virtually via the internet. Here are a few links to international websites:

Otter Family Album

<http://otters.net/index.html>

Scott Shannon's study of North American river otters, showing that preconceptions of social structure and organisation were not always borne out by reality. V. irritating for the academics!

Friends of the Sea Otter

<http://www.seaotters.org/otters>

Group dedicated to the study and conservation of the Pacific sea otter, with interesting facts, maps and of course the obligatory images.

Nat Geog

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/ottercam/>

The National Geographic have a selection of still pictures and video with the usual NatGeog quality. Click on 'Video Gallery' to see the list of videos. Broadband connection would be a bonus ..

A MISCELLANY GARDENERS

Buy all your plants from Old Cleeve Nurseries. Not only do they have an unusual and very interesting stock, they have also generously hosted two otter meetings recently, which has helped revitalise the survey effort on our northern boundaries. And they have a web cam on their heronry, so you can see close up real time action from the nests. Well worth a visit.



Not an otter: a mink out looking for some mischief. Quite a different looking beast.

FISHERMEN

The one that got away. While encouraging his son to fish on the Tone, a friend of Dave Morris noticed an otter upstream of them. Signalling for quiet, they put the lad's rod down where it was, and crept a short distance to get a good view. Suddenly the rod came very alive; there was a second juvenile otter attached to it. Presumably the abandoned worm had continued to dangle in the water, a fish had taken it, and the second otter, coming up to join its chum, had had a go at the fish. It soon escaped, of course.

DISPLAY BOARDS

Remember we have some good display material, which would enhance your local meetings, fetes and country fairs. Thanks to the Dixons for taking them to SWT's big jamboree in the Bishop's Palace at Wells. It may or may not be a direct result of their efforts that there are now reports of two cubs in that area.

NEW FOREST VISIT

We have been offered a conducted tour, as a group, of the new Forest Otter and Owl sanctuary. Could local groups email the sort of numbers interested to John Dixon, to get a feel of what is wanted. Although we are a very scattered lot, it should be possible to arrange something by email.

For a preview, see their website: <http://www.ottersandowls.co.uk>

OTTERS ON THE WING?

Discussing wildlife in general with a friend, a member was told that a young child had confused the names of a pair of creatures. She had loudly announced, with a great deal of expertise and authority, that the otters had not yet left for Africa as they were still perching on the telegraph wires. Presumably the swallows remained behind to swim and fish in the rivers ..