



Officers

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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 updates, including the 'Feathers' project, the sad demise of the Well's otter trio and the cessation of autopsies.

Best wishes

Patrick

NEXT MEETING, November 21, 2007:

Lisa Schneidau, Head of People & Wildlife, SWT

Lisa is responsible for setting the direction in the immediate future of wildlife conservation in the county. Her past work includes heading the Otters & Rivers Project which coordinated, for the first time, national otter conservation. She will talk on conservation and otters in Somerset.

To be held at Taunton Rugby Club, Hyde Lane, Bathpool TAUNTON, TA2 8BU, grid reference ST259257 at 7pm. All welcome - please complete and return the accompanying form to John Dixon no later than November 12th .

LOCAL MEETINGS & FORMS

A successful series of local meetings this spring has streamlined the admin of the group, and greatly increased the efficiency of the Two Day Event. Many thanks to Margaret Davis, who ran the Tone get-together, to Martin McNeill and John Dixon, who pulled in a large crowd to the pub at Wheddon Cross, and to Mary Liezers at Yeovil, whose smaller gathering produced an excellent and positive set of minutes - very helpful. Lyn Southway found the Brue valley flock rather harder to assemble, but a good coverage was achieved over much of it, and Steve Powell, despite being very busy with work duties, reorganised the Ilminster crew, (several surveyors just having given up without notice). Pete Goldie had fewer to cope with at the Bridgwater end of the Parrett catchment, which was just as well, as he is building himself a new house!

As last time, two years ago, this exercise revealed some gaps in our coverage, but it also set up a local awareness of them, and a possible mechanism for filling them as new members make themselves available. Three people suggested alterations to our forms, to make them easier to fill in. Karen and the staff at SERC have considered these carefully, BUT most of the proposals were intended to make the forms quicker to fill in only. The main purpose of having a set of forms is to get the information in a standardised way so that it can be downloaded and used; the forms are designed for output, not input, I'm afraid, so we have made few alterations.

TWO DAY EVENT 2007

Conditions were ideal for this year's co-ordinated survey on 28th and 29th April. 56 teams of members looked at 69 stretches of river, 306 sites in all. 226 of these (73.9%) held otter evidence; last year the score was 73%, the year before 69%. This continuity is encouraging, in view of the anxiety over the unusually high number of deaths recorded in 2006, many of them unseasonal and unexplained summer fatalities. 62 sites produced "Hits", (fresh evidence on Day 2), and there were 9 "Near Misses", (fresh work on Day 1 in an area where no fresh work could be found on Day 2). These mapped out as 43/45 occupied ranges. This compares with 33 and 39 in the two previous years, but this does not indicate an increase in numbers, just a variation in the pattern and effectiveness of our coverage.

Despite all the time and effort put into the local meetings by Martin McNeill, Margaret Davis, Lyn Southway, Steve Powell and Mary Leizers, we still had several important areas that were not looked at. Many thanks to the nine people who correctly operated the procedure for unavoidable absence; we managed to cover most of those gaps. However we were badly served by those people who have just dropped out of otter surveys without telling us, and by the 11 people who said they would cover a patch but who sent in no result. Sadly most of these absences were in the eastern areas, the "Fluke Zone", where we most need to know what is happening to the otter population. Congratulations and thanks to Clé Boyd, the group's former secretary, who was first in with her results, by post on Monday 30th April. Prompt returns on the proper form make things so much easier for the team that downloads and processes the information.

20 of the 56 teams had neither a Hit nor a Near Miss, (36%), and five of these areas were completely negative, with no otter signs at all. This means that there were 15 patches, (22%) with recent otter evidence, where the otter was not at home on the weekend in question. This highlights the mobility of these elusive animals: one in five would have been double counted if we had done only a One-day survey. Should there ever be another drastic reduction in otter numbers, the survivors will be free to expand their territories, and our results on the first day will not necessarily reveal the absences. Only by doing a full Two Day Event can we be sure of the continuing strength of our otter population. Apart from a widespread network of daily recorders, there is no other way we can get this very valuable information.

The North Somerset Otter Group, just to the north of us in what used to be Avon, ran a similar spring survey to coincide with ours. They looked at 71 sites, of which 24 (34%) were positive, and had three Hits on the second day, which were probably from three different otters. In addition they located two Mink.

Our survey sheets recorded nine Mink, five Water Voles, nine Kingfishers and nine Dippers. The only Otter seen this year was a very squashed one on the road at the top of Elworthy Barrows, a place quite a long way from a significant stream.

We will repeat this valuable exercise next year, on 27th and 28th April 2008. It is the most useful of all our activities, and I think we now have enough data from the series to be able to make an ongoing analysis. Meanwhile, we need suggestions for how the local teams can develop their coverage so as to get as strong a result from all areas as we did this time from the Exmoor people.

FEATHERS

Danny de la Hey made good progress with his thesis on the presence of feathers in spraints out on the levels. A microscope enabled him to identify them down to species of bird. UPDATE Danny is to be congratulated on graduating with a 2-1, and on having his otter spraint dissertation submitted for publication in a learned journal. A full summary of his findings will appear in a future issue of *this* learned journal, but it seems the otters on the Levels have been giving the coots a hard time!

FLUKE INVESTIGATOR

Welcome to Simone Gentner, a new member who has moved to Butleigh, near Street. She is doing a degree at Nottingham, and intends to do her dissertation looking at the Fluke, by mapping the presence of the fluke eggs in spraints.

THE MOAT OTTERS: A39 TRIPLE TRAGEDY

In early March a bitch and two cubs made their presence known in Wells; they were first reported as playing with unnecessary vigour and regularity in a waterside garden, to the detriment of the plants. Then they moved upstream, and upmarket, to spend much of their time in the Palace moat. Here they could be seen regularly, and at one of the neighbouring houses binoculars were hung on the bed head, so that the occupants could watch them every morning without having to get up. However, on 18th August they took themselves up a tributary stream onto Mendip. Here all three were killed trying to cross the busy A39. Mendip, being porous limestone, is a waterless desert, and of no use to otters. So where the bitch might have been making for is a mystery, as there are no streams marked on the map anywhere near where they were found.

Our thanks to Adrian Coward and Julie Parker, who got the bodies to the freezers at Secret World, where Pauline, Ellie and the rest of the staff were as supportive of otters and the Otter Group as they always are.

DIETARY STUDIES

Dr Rafael Miranda has now written up his thesis on the diet of otters on the Levels. He was especially interested in what use, if any, the otters were making of the newly introduced prey species of fish, the Pumpkinseed, the Topmouth Gudgeon, and the Sunbleak. His report has now been submitted to Aquatic Conservation, for peer review and publication. Eels and stickleback seem to dominate the otters' menu, and alien species feature very little, not even carp.

AXE VALLEY OTTER SURVEY, APRIL 2007

This, the fifth co-ordinated survey of the whole of the Axe, took place on 14th April, in unusual conditions of dryness and low water.

90 sites were looked at, and 51 of them had evidence of an otter, which is 56.6%. This is much lower than in previous spring searches: the first two scored 74.1%, the third 88%. However, there were more spraints recorded as "not dry", or in the previous terminology, "fresh". This year 25 sites had "ND" evidence. To an extent this may be a subjective judgment, with a degree of variation between observers as to when a not dry spraint becomes dry, especially this spring, when a drying wind was hardening the outside of otherwise moist items.

But when plotted onto a map these 25 do not reveal a great increase of otters. The adjudicated score is very similar to what we have found in previous years, but with a rather different pattern of distribution. The plot looks like 10 or 11 otters located, with a maximum of 12 and a minimum of nine. If one allows for the fact that in previous surveys we have failed to connect on the Yarty, so have been underscoring, the result tallies with our previous maximums. This year with the rivers so low, we should not have missed any out.

The difference this time is that there were several blank stretches. Luck may well account for some of these, the Offwell, for instance, or the two Smallridge streams, but there is quite a distinct swathe of blank tributaries on the south of the top end of the Axe, and on above Wayford right to the top. A big milk pollution above Clapton on the night of the 13th/14th may have contributed to this to some extent. And of course we know we lost a cub to an ongoing leakage of diesel at Drimpton last year; it could well have affected other animals when they tried to groom the oil off their coats. So we should keep an eye on this big area, to make sure that it is not blank for long, or because of some ongoing problem.

This year only four Anal Jellies were reported, all alongside fresh spraints. Mink were recorded twice only.

BIRTHS AND DEATHS

Only 13 sets of cubs on the list for Somerset to 10th September, which is down on expectation, but may well be a measure of poor communication rather than a reflection of the situation out on the river banks. However, please can everybody be vigilant, and report cubs promptly. If a new pollution or a new disease, a parasitic fluke, say, was to affect our otter population, one of the ways might be a non-lethal reduction of the ability of the bitch otters to conceive. This is what happened last time the population collapsed. Damaged and infertile otters lingered on, still producing spraints and therefore an impression of a healthy population, but not recruiting their successors. That is why we were so slow to realise that there was a problem, not waking up until the elderly and sterile bitches finally died themselves, some considerable time after the pollutions arose. So continuing cub production is a measure of all being basically well.

People also try to assure me that a good score of dead otters is likewise a sign of there being plenty of otters; to run over lots, there must be lots to run over, they affirm. Well, up to a point. Would the well-spaced-out hits on the maps of the Two Day Events support this? There is not necessarily another just around the corner, or meander, in this case.

Whatever, at 16 dead otters in Somerset to 10th September, the list is well down on last year's disastrous score. I leave it to you to wonder whether this is good, and some otters have been spared, or bad, in that it shows a shortage of prey for the motorists. BUT, if breeding is in fact down, and if the Two Day Event gives a moderately accurate indication of what's about, 16 is quite a lot to lose. This reinforces the need for a strong, widespread and vigilant set of Otter Group members. Otters are still endangered, and need assistance.

SAD STATISTIC

The otter that was found dead on the road up Elworthy Barrows hill onto the Brendons on the first day of the Two-Day event was the second in the twelve years to feature in the scores as a corpse. Nobody claimed a live one this year, but Lucy Mead glimpsed one during the annual Axe Valley Otter Survey.

TV PROGRAMME

A company has been filming James Williams for a World About Us documentary, looking at people who spend time as naturalists. Titled at present "Watching the Wild", it should be shown on BBC4 next summer. Don't blink, or go out to boil the kettle: otters are rationed to 7 minutes.

POST MORTEM TO CEASE

From 1st June Vic Simpson will not be taking dead otters from us as a matter of routine. He was funded for an assistant to help with the frequently heavy workload, but the EA has not renewed this.

We still need to collect top quality bodies, but they should now be frozen, even though this destroys some of their information. They will be sent in batches to Cardiff University, and treated with all the otters from the rest of England and Wales. In a way this will make life easier for us, by removing the pressure of collecting and despatching fresh corpses, but we will have to be extra vigilant that we do not get slack about recording in as much detail as possible every dead otter, regardless of its state. Please inform James Williams promptly of every dead Otter, but do not bother to freeze the bashed ones.

The first batch will be two from the M5, held by the RSPCA for us, and the three from Secret World. We could not support this valuable research project without the support of these two organisations. Our thanks to them, once more.

