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EDITORIAL

Dear Member -

Greetings! After all the wind, rain and snow we've experienced, the real spring must surely be around the corner. My bees are looking forward to some warmer weather and the otter loo in the Sheppey at the bottom of the field shows that the beasts have returned to the Wells area with a vengeance! So despite the dreary beginning, perhaps things are looking up? The Two-day Event will tell .. read on!

Best wishes

Patrick

PS. If you let me have your email address, we can send you a reminder to complete and return your survey forms - see James's note under 'Membership & Feedback'.

Two-Day Event, April 26-27, 2008:

Everybody should be contacted by a local co-ordinator who will set up a local meeting, as last time. The aim is to ensure as full a coverage as possible. If you cannot take part, please tell us so that we can arrange a substitute to cover your patch. The correct form should be in with this magazine. It helps a lot if you can phone about problems well in advance.

Lucy Mead has tabulated our previous efforts, which are shown below.

Somerset Otter Group : Two-Day events, 1995-2007

MONTH YEAR	MAY 1995	MAY 1996	MAY 1997	MAY 1998	MAY 1999	MAY 2000	OCT 2000	MAY 2001	MAY 2002	MAY 2003	APR 2004	MAY 2005	MAY 2006	APR 2007
Patches				31								58	65	69
Teams		29	50	56	60					41	54	50	60	56
Total sites			114	145	166	174	132		121	126	275	239	271	309
Sites Positive			84	98	100	124	78		56	96	198	169	197	227
% Sites Positive			74%	68%	60%	71%	59%		46%	76%	72%	71%	73%	73%
Hits	9	11	18	39	26	42	42		27	26	71	30	35	68
Near Misses	8		7	11	17	11				14	7	8	6	11
Total scores	17	11	25	50	43	53			27	40	78	38	41	79
Ajudicated ranges	15	16	25	32	37	34			21	30	54	39	32	44
% Sites with Hits			16%	27%	16%	24%	32%		22%	21%	26%	13%	13%	22%
Blank Patches		5	1								4			5

PUBLICATIONS

Foremost among recent publications on the Otter is the Somerset Otter Group's own introductory pamphlet. This cheerfully illustrated, glossy booklet gives a full explanation of the mysteries of surveying for otters, and the aims and purpose of the group, with helpful diagrams of otter signs and copies of all our forms. The idea is that in future all new members will be charged a £5 joining fee, for which they will receive this helpful explanatory booklet. This is instead of us trying to start an annual subscription, which would cost more to collect than we could charge.

We hope that many of our present members will also want to buy one. It will have everything they have ever needed to know in one cover, and it is worth it for Ian Anderson's photos alone. As far as I am aware, there is no other publication quite like it, and it would be a lovely present for anybody interested in country matters, riverside walks, fishing, or Scottish coastal holidays etc. Their outdoor days would be greatly enriched once they had been made aware of what to look for beside the streams and on the sea shore.

We shall have copies at all our meetings and at slide shows etc, but if any member would like one sooner, send an A5 SAE to James Williams with your £5. Cash please or cheques made payable to James Williams.

MEMBERSHIP & FEEDBACK

Karen has worked very hard for long weeks to sort out all the data the Otter Group has accumulated over the years in the SERC computer. She has rationalised the format, and fed it into a statistical program. So we should now be in a position, thanks to her patience and persistence, to produce meaningful report-back on what we are finding.

Some of the earlier records are less useful, in that they are not compatible, and because negatives were not recorded when otters had almost vanished completely. In those days, the urgent thing was to locate any surviving otter. Nowadays we have to be more methodical, if we are to be able to make informed comment on the current situation. So people must send their records in punctually, on the correct forms. If you have any problems, Karen will be delighted to talk you through the forms; that is quicker for her than unravelling a nonsense on your paper.

Basically the system should be that you do the first three months of the year, take a copy for yourself, and send it by the beginning of the fourth month to Karen at SERC. She vets them, they are entered into the machine, and as soon as a complete set is logged in, the computer can print out a result. If there are any ottery anxieties, such as the one at the beginning of 2007, when several surveyors voiced their worries that their otters had gone, the computer should be able to check for confirmation within a month. But only if you let it, by being prompt with your score sheets.

To this end, we will send an e-mail reminder at the start of each quarter to all those we have an e-mail address for. Why not send one now to patrick@kinkajouknowhow.co.uk so that you know he has you on his file. Rest assured that your details will be held in strictest confidence and not given to anyone else without your express permission.

POST MORTEMES

The programme of otter post mortems continues, and we should do our utmost to support it to the full. As was announced in the last Newsletter, the otters no longer go to the Wildlife Veterinary Investigation Centre at Truro, for Vic Simpson to examine. Now they are sent to Dr. Liz Chadwick, at Cardiff University. She and Vic gave a fascinating update on their studies at the Environment Agency offices at Exminster. Their approaches are very different, but complementary. Vic was examining them to ascertain their state of health/disease and well-being. As he only started long after the dramatic and nearly total collapse of the otter population, one of his main concerns has been to ascertain what is a "normal" state for an otter to be in, and then, by implication, what departures each otter has shown from that. Over time he has been able to demonstrate lowering levels of various contaminants, such as the organochlorine pesticides and PCBs. Alarmingly, adult bitches carry a lesser burden than dog otters, and this can be explained by a higher level in cubs of both sexes; the mothers are offloading some of their pollutants to their young in the fat of the colostrums. Vic has demonstrated a close link between deficient levels of Vitamin A and the presence of these poisons, and this may well be the cause of 32 out of 60 recent corpses showing severe retinal dysplasia.

Although he has not found evidence for infectious diseases such as Hardpad, Weil's Disease, Salmonella or even Aleutian Disease, which is common in mink, he has found many otters with severe sepsis. This comes from recent wounds, almost all the result of fighting with other otters, and can be the direct cause of death. Over 50% of the otters sent to him, most of which were killed by being run over, have unhealed wounds from recent fights. In 2004 this rose to over 70%. He is unsure how to account for this amazingly high level of aggression, and how to link it with road deaths. The implication is that there must be many other otters out there dying in secret from all this. If for no other reason, we need to send in every corpse we can, until this worrying mystery is solved.

Liz Chadwick's approach is slightly different. She is less concerned to find out what is wrong with the otters, although most of the same tests and screenings will still be carried out. A strong emphasis will be to ascertain what else a dead otter can tell us. Lead levels, parasites, the presence of toxoplasmosis, (the nasty which was passed from cat litter flushed down the sewers of California into the sea, where it killed 13% of the sea otters), prey identification by DNA, (this has already disclosed slugs and worms in the diet, which we did not know about previously), and the development of an analysis of the otters' scent glands, to find out what

information it conveys to the otters, and to enable us eventually to read that from the spraints. This is far cheaper than DNA analysis of spraints, and probably more informative. It will back up other research into the age of the otters, and therefore the population structure.

All this should help us to deliver positive and well targeted conservation to our still fragile otter population. Ours is a strongly populated area, but we still have a relatively small number of individual animals. In other areas they are still very scarce indeed. So all our dead bodies are valuable. They can be frozen now, and then you should contact James Williams as to where to deliver them for storage until a batch can go to Cardiff.

MINK & POLECATS

We should continue to record any signs of Mink. These American mustelids have almost vanished from most of our rivers, but "almost" means that they could make a comeback, perhaps. That you have not seen one on your patch does not mean that you won't. In early spring all the mink go on the wander, seeking summer territories and each other. They travel long distances, so a pair could turn up anywhere, without warning. Water vole is one of their favourite foods, and they can wipe a population out very rapidly, eating every last one.

Exciting news, or worrying, if you keep poultry or pheasants, is that Polecats are now back in our area. Small numbers have been reported from the vicinity of Catcott. They are principally predators of rabbits and rats, and their spread is inhibited by the prevalence of rat poison in their food at farms. But they should do quite well on the rabbits on the more open spaces of the levels. Simone Gentner found a dead one on the Polden Hills road; it was a bitch that had bred that summer. They can have amazingly large litters if food is sufficient, so keep your eyes open. Does anybody know when they were last found in Somerset before their extirpation?

Stoats and Weasels are also worth recording. Dead weasels are wanted at Cardiff University. Freeze it please, and inform James Williams.

GOOD NEWS FROM M5 CORPSE

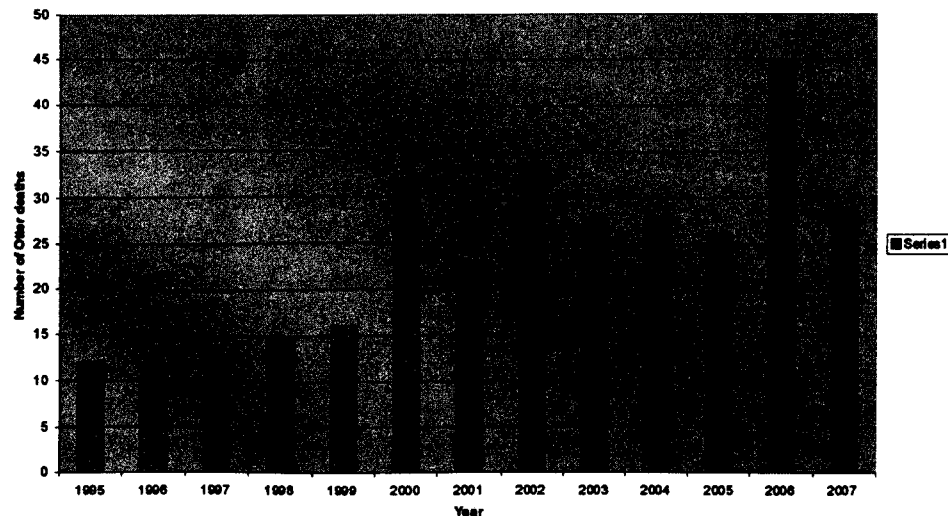
The last otter Vic examined was an immature from the M5 where it crosses the Sherford stream near the motorway services at Taunton Deane. Thanks go to the road staff of Interroute, at the Chelston depot, who collected this and quite a few other specimens for us, and to Lucy Mead who got it into the freezers at the RSPCA. This otter showed some thickening of the gall bladder, but Vic was unable to find any fluke. It seems probable that this otter, like one or two others he has handled, has shrugged off a mild infestation of bile-fluke through the process known as self heal. This is extremely encouraging in view of the considerable recent geographical spread of the fluke.

BIRTHS AND DEATHS

2007 was a slightly better year for otter deaths than the previous, very worrying, one. I recorded 37 local deaths. 9 of them were over the frontier in Devon, but within the orbit of "our" otters. 21 made it to the post mortems, which is very good. Many thanks to all those who turned out at short notice, to collect them and deliver them to a collection point. Most of the others were either flat or rotting. We wasted very few, but it is still a pity that the EA's Wessex Area will not support the EA funded post mortem programme, by helping with the collection. It was ridiculous that they photographed a dead otter on one of their sites, but left it on the roadside. It had gone by the time somebody tried to collect it. That otter was in the same area where we lost 7 in a 5 mile radius in July 2006, so it might have thrown some light onto why such a big carnage took place in what is usually the lowest month for otter deaths. Or perhaps not, yet it is hard to see why an otter would get onto the road at that point; you could drive cattle under the bridge there.

13 litters of cubs in the book for 2007. Counting generously, and with full benefit of the doubt, that meant 23 cubs, 5 of which were injured or dead. That is 10 fewer viable cubs than known deaths in Somerset. Of course, the cub record is far from complete, alas, but then so is the death list. Several otters will have limped off the road to die in a bush, and sick animals probably die curled up in a holt. Cub records are important for two reasons. They show that the otters are healthy enough to reproduce, despite gender benders and sheep dips etc. And they could give some indication of the size of a stable population. Dog otters and dispersing juveniles wander hither and yon, impossible to count or estimate. But bitches on maternity leave are perforce stationary. Comparison of their numbers over the years would be indicative of what sort of status things are in.

Otter Deaths by year from 1999 to 2007



FLUKE CONFERENCE FAILS

There were high hopes in the spring that, at last, we would pull together such knowledge as there is about the new bile fluke, *Pseudamphistomum truncatum*. Vicky Breeze of Somerset County Council's environment services wanted to set up a forum for the exchange of knowledge about the life sequence of this complicated and potentially harmful parasite. The idea was that SCC would host a conference at which invited specialists would join forces and pool the different bits of relevant information. However, none of the major government bodies would send anybody.

She had hoped for a snail specialist, a parasitologist, a fish biologist, and some EA scientist from fisheries. Each passed the buck; otters are not fish, so it's nothing to do with us at CEFAS. Natural England did not even reply to my letters. When I suggested to the Regional Head of Conservation for the Environment Agency that she should exert some influence in support of this proposal, the fluke having been first located on her patch, and the EA being the official sponsoring body for the species under the BAP system, there was horror. As it had not been budgeted for, it not being known about previously, she couldn't arrange for any of the EA staff to attend. So there is to be no conference.

The only research on it is being done by a new member of the Somerset Otter Group, who is looking at the presence or absence of fluke eggs in spraint from three areas, the Brue Levels, the Parrett/Cary Moors, and the Tone, for an undergraduate thesis at Nottingham University. Half of the most recent batch of otters examined at post mortem had the bile fluke, and many of those without it were youngsters that had scarcely had time to travel far enough and to eat sufficient fish to stand a fair chance of becoming infested. Despite being a new life form for this country, it has obviously started to be well established. That in itself is remarkable, considering the statistical improbabilities inherent in its lifestyle: it is dependent, as far as we know, on a series of coincidences between a snail, a fish, and then a very rare final mammal host, the otter. A fluke needs to get a lot of ducks in a row to become a grandparent, yet they seem, from this latest statistic, to be managing well to consolidate themselves throughout the area where they were first noticed in 2003. And of course the post mortems continue to map its spread to other areas. It has now been found as far north as Stratford-on-Avon, as far south as the Exe estuary, and it has crept east along the south coast through Dorset and into Hants. Well done it, but who cares? Not the people paid by taxes to look after this sort of thing, anyway.

However, the parasite may not be as damaging as we feared at first. Another otter, the bitch from the Palace Moat at Wells, turned out to have a badly damaged bile system, with hardening of the gall bladder typical of this disease. Yet only one fluke was present, and she had successfully reared two bouncing cubs to an age of 7 or 8 months, before the family were all killed on the road. This process involves

the bile system, to organise fat in her diet and in the production of healthy milk. Despite the fluke, she had managed, and seemed to have shaken off the worst of her own infestation, but at a cost; she was very thin and underweight. So perhaps the fluke will prove to be only a drawback and not as lethal as we suspected. Though the life of an otter is sufficiently difficult at times for us not to want another drawback.

MAJOR PUNCH-UP IN TAUNTON

Mrs Gill Wilson lives beside the Sherford Stream, which feeds into the Tone in the centre of Taunton. She has often seen otters fishing in the pool below her riverside balcony, but this time was different. In mid October, with some friends, she watched and heard two otters having a major fight. It was protracted, noisy, violent and brutal, lasting over quarter of an hour. Finally the smaller otter fled into the gardens and the larger moved away downstream, making their huffing call of anger, and also a loud yowl or howl, which her friends said they had heard previously at night, coming from the stream, but had not known what it was.

This exemplifies Vic Simpson's findings of fight damage, but I think it is only the third instance of first hand witness of an otter fight I know of. Perhaps it was fortunate that the watchers were up on a balcony. When Alf Wilson was fishing for seatrout at night in the Lune he observed a fight close to him. After they had stopped, he resumed fishing again. As soon as he moved and swished the water with his waders, a furious otter surged across the pool, and chased him out of the water, presumably thinking the noise indicated the return of its beaten rival.

AXE VALLEY OTTER SURVEY

The Axe Valley Otter Survey repeated their examination of the whole of the River Axe (South coast) in early October. As the river and its tributaries go through three counties, the idea is to do the whole thing in the same way on the same day. Previously the otters on this important river had featured sporadically on the fringes of three different investigations, so in fact nobody had a clue what was going on. There have now been five successful co-ordinated searches, and this was an attempt to look at the situation in the autumn instead of the spring.

Unfortunately Devon let us down, by not getting their act together at all. Although an offer of substitutes was made, nobody turned out, and nobody let us know. "I hope this has not left too big a gap in your results." Well, Yes, of course it did. Despite this, six otter ranges were located, which is about what we would have expected in that area. The Axe is a Special Area of Conservation, and this ongoing set of surveys has produced a very consistent picture of the otters on it. The limited number serves to emphasise how widely these animals separate themselves from each other, and how long a stretch of wholesome river is needed to sustain one animal.