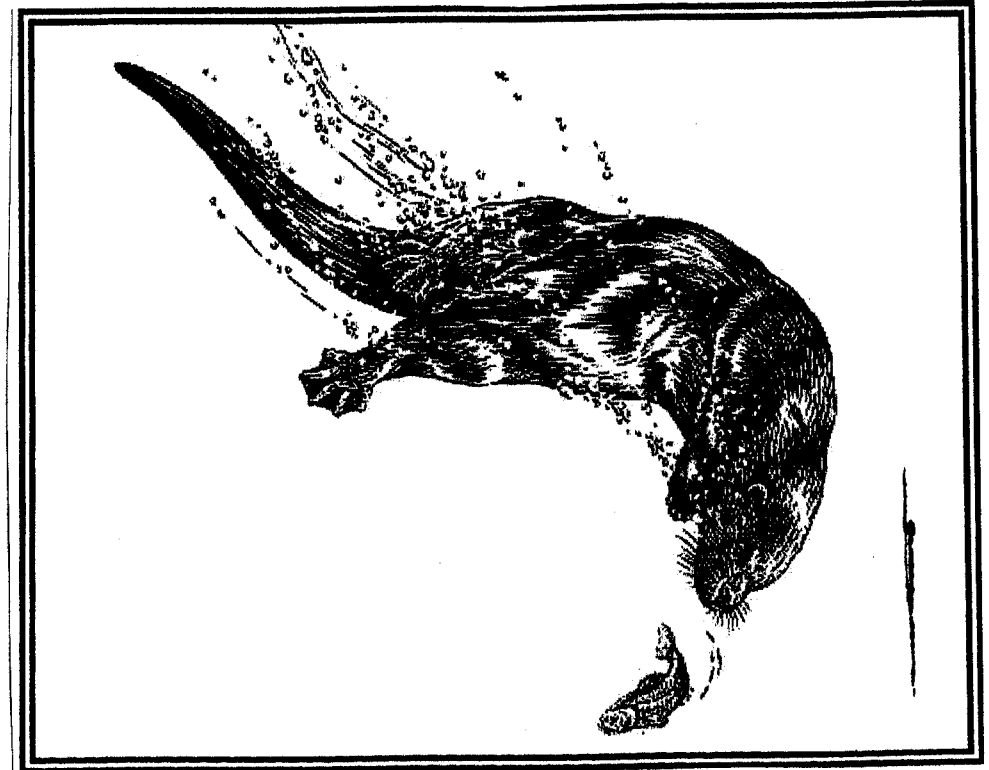




Somerset Wildlife Trust Otter Group

NEWSLOTTER 27

October 2008



Officers

Chairman:

James Williams

Secretary:

Lucy Mead

Recorder (all Survey Forms):

Karen Coxon

Newsletter editor:

Patrick McCormack

NEXT MEETING, November 17, 2008:

Monday, November 17th, at 7.30 pm. In the 'World's End' pub, near Bradford on Tone.

A buffet and, by popular request, wildlife films by Peter Hurman, including local and Scottish otters, demented stoats, the deer rut and other intriguing items. Plus the social side of the evening, and an update on the Group's activities. £7 per head. RSVP to Lucy Mead, by email to lucy@otter.org.uk in time for us to warn the pub about numbers.

APOLOGIES .. OR NOT - James Williams

I am sorry that this Newsletter has been so long in appearing, but I am not in a position to apologise. It is due to people beyond my control. We had an amazing turn-out of surveyors for the spring Two Day Event, but it took ages to get all the results in, so that we could start the quite complicated process of scoring and mapping. This pushed things on by a month, and jammed up into time set aside for other things, like holidays and trips abroad. Next year we will have to have a cut-off date, after which all non-returns are scored blank.

It was also a pity that the completeness of the survey, to which so many contributed their time and effort, was let down by people not doing the patches we thought they were going to. Sadly, the main disappointments in this respect came from four big conservation organisations, outfits known by their initials as much as by their resonant titles. As they control important areas of land, this was a major let-down. Surely, if there is some kind of problem, the least these funded organisations could do is to lift up a phone and enable us to find a substitute.

Despite these irritations, the survey was a major success, and the map, and the graphs of the recent series of surveys, give a comprehensive overview of the Somerset otter population. In the report on the 4th National survey, Andrew Crawford stressed that our county was one of three areas where especial attention ought to be focused on the vulnerable populations of otters. Well, now we have, and thanks to the continuing efforts of you all, we are in a position to report numerically and statistically on our otters. As far as I know, and I study these things hard, this is unique; we have a set of population data based on a constant effort survey covering a large area, several contiguous catchments, and a particularly important one, in that we were for many years, (and possibly still are), the frontier area for the recovery of the otters. There is work still to be done, but some of it has been started; we want to try to do for the Brue valley the sort of comprehensive population study that we have achieved for the Tone, and collection of this data is far advanced. The hope is that it will be digested and written up as part of the proposed book of Current Otter Studies in Somerset, the group's next project.

At the local meetings in the spring, and at the summer displays, many of you saw some of the graphs and charts produced by Lucy Mead. These conclusions, and some of the recent student theses based on local studies, are sufficiently novel and important to deserve a wider circulation. There is to be a book of these reports, nicely produced with photos as well as the graphs and charts; I hope it will be out in the spring: work has already started.

Meanwhile here is the article that appeared in the SWT Newsletter, and the detailed list of scores. The all-important map is too large to reproduce here, so you will have to attend the autumn meeting for that.

POSTCODE L'OTTERY - Two Day Event, 2008

Otters, being nocturnal and nomadic, are notoriously difficult to count. It seems from ongoing reports that Somerset is a fortunate area for these rare animals, in that they turn up in many parts of the county, but it is still important to assess the strength of their population. For, if some kind of reversal occurred, the remaining otters would still wander widely, and give rise to plentiful reports, so we might not notice their decline until too late. This is what happened last time, when we so nearly lost them all to chemical contamination.

This is the purpose of our annual Two-day Survey. By checking for signs on consecutive days we can be sure where the wanderers were on the intervening night, and, if enough people help, we get a basic estimate of the strength of the population. This year's survey, the 14th, was the most nearly comprehensive, and the most successful, we have done. The result shows that the problems of 2005 and 2006 have not impinged on the spread or the numbers of the Somerset otters.

99 people took part, and looked twice at 109 stretches of river. Only 6 of these patches were devoid of otter evidence, blank on both days. They gave figures for 428 different sites, of which 306 were positive, with otter evidence. Pete Banfield actually saw the otter at Mudford. The percentage of sites that were positive is 71.5%. For the last 6 years this figure has been very steady, between 75% and 69% every year, (average 72.6%). This indicates that the population is stable, and probably a "full house".

To ascertain what a full house might mean in terms of numbers we look at all the 'Hits' and 'Near Misses'. A "Hit" is a bit of evidence on Day 2 that was definitely not there on Day 1, proof of the presence of an otter in the night. Sometimes there is very fresh evidence on Day 1 which is not repeated on Day 2; that is a "Near Miss", proof that an otter was in the area during part of the weekend, but the observer lost track of it on the next night, probably because it had "nomaded" off to the next patch of river. There were 99 Hits and 16 Near Misses; 47 patches scored Hits (43%). This is encouraging, but as the size of the patches varies enormously, we find it better to count the number of sites hit: this year we had a record 99 hits, or 32% of the sites that were positive, slightly more than usual. In normal years we

have had an average of 24% of positive sites used at any one time, showing that otters use about a quarter of their home range on any one night. The exceptions were the problem years of 2005 and 2006, when this figure halved to 12% and 13%.

These Hits and Near Misses are then transferred onto a map, and the pattern of the dots examined. For each distinct cluster one otter can be safely assumed. Even when we know that there is a bitch and cubs present in the area, we still score only one animal: that is all that can be deduced from the evidence. In some places the clusters are less distinct, and so there is doubt about exactly how many ranges are involved. This year's map revealed a minimum of 42, and a maximum of 54 otters, well spread across most of the county. In addition there are seven places where we had 'reasonable suspicion', from the near misses, or from other knowledge, that there was an otter nearby. This gives a population of at least 49, and probably 61, otters for which we now have a post code.

We have nine vacant patches and six people failed to cover their sites this year, so there are 13 stretches not looked at. If 43% of those were to be similarly positive, that would give another four otters, and a maximum possible of 65 for the whole county. This is consistent with estimates from previous years. Although it is reassuring to find numbers up to expectation, it is not a very large total for such a wide area, from Simonsbath to Farleigh Hungerford, one otter per 57 square kilometres, and it makes our high number of deaths rather worrying.

Next year's Two Day Event is on 26th and 27th April. All help welcomed.

BILE FLUKE

The post mortems continue to find this unwelcome newcomer; the latest batch of frozen otters had fluke in 90% of the adults. Dr Elizabeth Chadwick, the pathologist, has now found it in several new areas in the north of England and far parts of Wales, places it cannot have reached by transmission from infected otters or other similar final hosts. The map is strangely uneven, with large gaps in its distribution. I had an idea, without really studying it, that perhaps the fluke is absent from hilly areas, where the water is fast flowing. This would agree with what seemed to be

an incidental finding of Simone Gentner's dissertation. She found fluke eggs in spraints at Clatworthy, and down on the moors, but not on the intermediate, "salmonid" reaches of the Tone.

Otter 135, from the Yeo at Mudford, (Parrett catchment), had 132 flukes in its gall bladder. A severe burden for any animal, but 135 was a very young sub-adult, weighing only 6lbs, although "not emaciated". The p-m report points out that the parasite was not its major problem, however: "multiple puncture wounds around vulva, anus and lower abdomen, too many to assess pairings; cause of death -drowning following severe fighting injuries -also infection around head wounds."

BIRTHS & DEATHS

We know of 27 otter deaths in Somerset in the first nine months of the year, and six nearby. 19 of the 33 have been collected for post mortem. Our thanks to the RSPCA at West Hatch, and to Secret World at Highbridge for all their invaluable help with this. An unusual feature of this year has been the number of small cubs killed. I do not think there is any sinister cause, but two of them showed signs of lung infection, so I have asked Cardiff to look into that further. I think the cubs come to grief because the mother is too anxious and hasty when away from them. She has to leave them to hunt fish, and is less cautious than usual from anxiety to return.

We lost one bitch to a car outside County Hall, in the centre of Taunton. One of her cubs was subsequently run over, the other was rescued in the hospital grounds. A second bitch, and one cub, were killed at the flood relief dam upstream of Norton Fitzwarren; the second cub was found only after it had died. A similar tragedy happened at Ashford reservoir, near Cannington, and another lactating bitch was killed at Shapwick, so her cubs will also have been lost. Three other dead bodies are noted down as 'cub', and of course we do not know the status of some of the corpses we did not collect. A third of the known casualties so far this year have been cubs.

I have notes on 13 litters of cubs, and one just in Devon, with two others to be confirmed. This includes the litters listed above, that came to grief. If each of the litters produced two viable young, (and five of them didn't), then that would just balance out our known deaths. I am sure we miss hearing about both deaths and births, but I am increasingly inclined to think that cubs over the age of suckling become quite prominent and visible to anglers and late night pub leavers. Enough of those that are reported get phoned in more than once to make me think that we hear eventually about most of them. One would not expect a much larger rate of breeding from our assessment of the total population.

When one considers the hazards revealed in post mortems such as that on 135, hazards which are bound to take out some of the up and coming young otters, we cannot afford also to lose so many of the recruits before they have reached an age to face those hazards.

STUDIES IN PROGRESS

Simone Gentner has now written up her search for fluke eggs in spraint. It looks as if this method, or a similar one, could be used to detect the presence of the parasite in live otters, and other animals. Up to now it has only been discovered at post mortem. Danny de la Hey's thesis on prey preferences on the levels has also been published, and Dr Miranda's examination of the use Levels' otters make of exotic feral fish has now appeared.

Other equally interesting topics are being investigated. Emma Daniel and her friends are looking into the use otters make of the water in the town of Taunton, with a view to ascertaining whether all the development and riverside engineering work affects them. James Williams is collecting spraint for the investigation by Eleanor Kean of Cardiff University into individual identification by scent analysis. It is proposed to do a summary of all the data about the population of the Brue, in the same way that we have looked at the Tone; the idea is to do this in advance of next year's proposed 5th National Survey, and to compare results. We are almost there with the urgent requirement for an ongoing statistical summary of each quarter's regular survey results, with a view to detecting problems such as arose in 2006 more rapidly, and in time to look into them. We continue to map cubs, to find out if this approach could be used as an index of the strength of the population. And we continue to take part in the two surveys each year of the River Axe; this spring we found much the same number of fresh spraints, but the otters seemed to

LITERATURE, ETC

Our starter pack for beginners has been very popular; and has raised funds for the group's expenses, and for future publications. The idea is that it goes for a £5 joining fee to all new members, but it is of course also available as an attractive and informative read to established members, and to the public at shows and displays. Many members have bought a copy, and thanks to them, and with some contributions from slide shows, we now have reasonable funds in the bank. It would make a good Christmas present for any young, country-minded person who would like identifying tracks and sleuthing about as a 'nature detective'.

James Williams' hardback book, "The Otter Among Us", has been reprinted; this book, beautifully illustrated with paintings and line drawings by Bruce Pearson, president of the Society of Wildlife Artists, was shortlisted for Wildlife Book of the Year when it first came out. It has been out of print for some years, and was starting to fetch silly prices secondhand on the internet. It is still the most recent general book on British otters, and it too would make a lovely Christmas gift. Copies direct from the author.

James was seen recently on BBC4, in a series about amateur naturalists rather dottily called 'Born to be Wild'. Most people turned it on expecting the grosser

excesses of punk rockers, but had to watch James in his wellies with his dogs instead. His son Robert tactlessly upstaged him with a whole hour on BBC1 about Spectacled Bears in South America.

There are some good websites for otter enthusiasts: try the International Otter Survival Fund first, www.otter.org. From there you can link onto the other main ones, such as Otterjoy, for updated ottery news, or John McMinn's informative Lake District site, www.ottersite.co.uk.

OTTER WATCHING

Otters have been showing well at some of the hides on the Shapwick Heath reserve. For a long while Decoy hide was the best one; then that litter broke up, and things went a bit quiet, until another bitch with two cubs started showing at Noah's, and/or the wader lagoon, especially when the water was pumped down to provide mud for the autumn migrants. Recently the cubs seem to be a bit more independent, but if you want to go to watch these otters the best thing is to consult the excellent weekly bulletin produced, with photos, by Alison McKenzie. It is posted as a Natural England notice at the Peat Moors Centre, and a copy is available in each of the main hides. This will update you as to where the action is at.

SUMMER EVENTS

The Otter Group has been busy promoting both the species, and our activities on its behalf. Lucy Mead put together a superb and informative display for the Annual Fair at Forde Abbey, and this then went to the meeting of the Axe Valley Otter Survey group in Dorset.

Natural England held an Otter Day at the Peat Moors Centre in August; so we altered and enlarged it for that event. Lucy Mead, Alison McKenzie, James Williams and Shelley Saltman represented the Otter Group, and gave assistance. After a slide show on the basics, the punters were split into two groups and taken out to watch for otters. Both sites turned up trumps, with excellent photographable views of an otter doing its thing quite close. No skulking glimpses, but full performance and poses. The trouble is, the public will think it is a doddle, always that easy and straightforward. But congratulations to Simon Clarke, the new warden at Shapwick, for organising the event.

Finally we took the display to the SWT open day at the Bishop's Palace in Wells, where it occasioned a lively interest. An otter returned to the palace moat this spring, and the palace staff were to stock with rudd and trout to increase the chances of it being around. You will remember that last year's family were killed on the road over Mendip. Lucy, Alison and James manned the stall.