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EDITORIAL

Dear Member -

The annual cycle of the natural world returns, as does that of the Somerset Otter Group. In this issue you will read the details of this year's Two Day Event, together with a summary of the achievements of the Group to date, together with the influence of our activities in many areas far and wide - even Darkest Peru!

Best wishes

Patrick

Two-Day Event, April 25-26, 2009:

Our major annual happening is the Two Day Event, a survey of the whole county. It will be on 25th and 26th April. Last year 99 people volunteered to help. To plan this, as before, there is to be a series of local meetings, to which all are invited, for the allocation of survey patches and to make sure we have full coverage. These help enormously with the smooth running of all our surveys, so please make every effort to attend. You can meet the other enthusiasts from your area; new members can be introduced; and survey patches can be reallocated and defined, to avoid gaps or overlaps. The venues are:

23rd March, Tone area, Worlds End pub, Bradford on Tone, on A38, 7pm.

23rd March, Exmoor & N coast, Rest & Be Thankful, Wheddon Cross, 7:30pm.

30th March, Brue, Cary, Frome, etc., Ring of Bells, Ashcott, 7pm.

2nd April, Parrett & Isle, White Hart, Martock, 7pm.

Please, please, let us know of problems so that we can arrange cover for your absence. The survey form is enclosed. If you know you cannot use it, fill in the sites you would have checked, and return it to James Williams, so that he can pass it on to your substitute. Because the National Otter Survey is being repeated this year, prompt return of results is essential.

Also we shall take part in a survey of the River Axe (S Coast) on 4th April. All help will be warmly welcomed.

MEMBERSHIP COSTS

The cost of running the larger, and more ambitiously active group, has become considerable. Our main source of fund raising is the sale of our attractive, illustrated, introductory handbook. All new members are asked for a joining fee of £10, to include this booklet. If you have recently joined and managed to slip through this net, we would love to have your money also. I also hope that established members would like to contribute, but of course there can be no compulsion.

SPRING MEETING

The spring meeting will be held in the lecture theatre of Wellington School, at 7.30pm on Monday 6th April.

Dr Elizabeth Chadwick will explain the different emphasis of the post mortem programme since she took over from Vic Simpson; Vic, as a vet, was mostly concerned with health and disease. The new emphasis goes much more widely into population study and structure. Eleanor Kean will explain the new spraint study we are helping with, an attempt to identify individuals by analysis of the scent chemicals. And Eleanor Sherrard-Smith will explain the study she is undertaking, with our backing, into the bile fluke, and the new, similar parasite they have recently discovered in the course of their work in Cardiff.

This should be a most exciting evening; SOG is involved right at the sharp end of current research, so come along and hear all the latest.

Wellington School lecture theatre, on 6th April at 7:30pm. £5 to include light refreshments. Plentiful parking in the adjacent public car park.

RSVP, as numbers are limited, to Lucy Mead, Hon Secretary: 01823 480 425.

SURVEY EVALUATION

SERC now has a new and better system. It will enable us to be more vigilant for the well-being of our otters. This is the method, simple, but strict: you check your patch three times during the first three months, and send the form in early April. A patient volunteer enters it into the computer. On 1st May the computer automatically counts and calculates the results, and compares them to previous scores.

We therefore get an instant picture of the health of our otter population one month after the last assessment on the ground. This repeats every quarter, so, over time, it will disclose any trends. If we had had such a system, it would have warned us in 2005 and 2006 that there was a problem which reduced the scores by 50%.

The only snag to this new scheme comes if surveyors cannot get their forms in on time. By the time this system is running, Somerset Wildlife Trust should have its new web-site in action, so you will be able to see the results, and all our latest news, on an on-going basis.

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
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.

AUTUMN MEETING

About 60 members came to the World's End pub for a social evening of wildlife films and a buffet. Thanks to Lucy Mead for the display of your latest results. Peter Hurman showed his wildlife films. We saw amazing close-ups of local stags, and were fascinated to hear Peter talking about them personally. He knows them as individuals from year to year; if only we could do that with some of our otters!

Peter also showed us the stoat family sequence, all the giddy youngsters jumping in and out of the puddles. But for me the highlight was the wonderful close-up of a most majestic and senior dog otter that he filmed on the shore in Scotland, a masterful animal with real presence.

ROAD BLACK SPOTS

We still find most of the dead otters on the roadsides, and sadly there are still some notorious Black Spots. However, efforts to improve things are being made at several of them. The Environment Agency is getting the East Lyng reflectors repaired, and also the netting at Beer Wall. The problem at their site at Blindman's Sluice, also on the Lanacre/Sowey system, is more difficult, but they should be able to realign the fencing to make all but the most obstinate otter use the perfectly adequate road bridge, and to deter the idle animals from taking the shortcut.

The Highways Agency is looking to put more mitigation in place on the trunk roads system, and James, Lucy, and Emma Fisher of the Highways Agency team, looked at three sites on the A303 in December. The main anxiety is by the Sparkford roundabout, an area that Shelley Saltman prospected for us earlier. The otters come up a small tributary of the Cary, to a disused ornamental pond in the grounds of Hazlegrove School. From there it is a very short distance to the road, where the wretched rabbits chew access holes through the protective fence. To their surprise, they found that the bad crossing at Compton Pauncefoot had already had a ledge installed, which should suffice in all but the highest floods.

OTTERS ON EXMOOR

The fifth repeat of the National Otter Survey is to happen in 2009. Every seven years the map of England is divided into a chessboard of black and white squares, 50km in width, and the same series of sites, in the black squares only, are looked at once, for signs of otters. Most of Exmoor is in a black square, so next spring there will be an outline summary of the otter population, based on what these well spaced out sites reveal. This broadbrush survey is enough to reassure those of us in areas with otters that they are still present, and for those whose otters had not returned by the last survey, it provides a check on whether they have started to re-establish themselves. But it is not sufficiently detailed to provide a full picture of the state of things at the sort of level that deer managers, for instance, would expect as a necessary basis for any management plan.

However, it will provide an excellent foundation for us local otter enthusiasts to make a more thorough survey of the otters of the National Park. One of the objectives in the ENP's strategic plan is for proper monitoring of the otter population, and they support our proposal to make the effort to do a thorough assessment of the whole of Exmoor next April. The idea is to combine the three existing checks, the National Survey, the Somerset Otter Group's annual Two Day Event, and the April results of Devon Wildlife Trust's Operation Otter. If this is well co-ordinated, we should get a snapshot of the whole moor, and start to have some indication of the numbers of animals involved, and to discover whether the otters merely travel across the moor, or whether there is a properly resident set of animals living there all the time.

The method is quite simple, but it needs a fair amount of planning and liaison to get it to work fully. At the weekend of 25th and 26th April all the otter surveyors in Somerset will be doing their stretches of river twice. This has been happening for several years now, and they are starting to build up a most informative set of records about the strength of the otter population, its spread, and which areas they favour. If we can so organise things that the Devon third of the National Park is also included, we will end up with three sets of figures for the Exmoor National Park: two full day's worth, on one of which the freshness of the evidence is beyond dispute, and as a cross reference, the slightly less thorough figures from the National Survey, which will be done at a different time of the spring.

If you are already an Exmoor Otter surveyor, please let us know whether you can or cannot survey your regular sites on that weekend. If you are not involved, but would like to be, please contact Eleanor Knott at Devon Wildlife Trust, or James Williams, for Somerset. We will need several extra people, on the Devon side especially, as there are some gaps to be filled. You will be allocated some places to visit, and you will be asked to look at them twice, on the two consecutive mornings. That is two half days on the moor, and a form to fill in and post. If there is a demand, we will hold a training walk before the actual weekend. (Now fixed for Sunday 22nd March, at Simonsbath.) Once the results forms are in, the statistics and maps can be compiled, and it is proposed to publish a report as a special Exmoor edition of Somerset's "Newslotter", and to launch the findings at a social event to which all participants will be invited.

SOMERSET OTTER GROUP: RESUME OF ACHIEVEMENTS***BE PROUD OF YOUR GROUP'S SUCCESSES!***

Over the 20 years since it was founded, the Somerset Otter Group has achieved much, and been an active participant in many projects. Here is a summary of some of the main achievements.

- ♦ The longest series of continuous records for one area. 35 years. Libby Lenton started the regular, monthly series of records for the Brue valley in 1972.
- ♦ Monthly recording across the county; ongoing recording for SERC.
- ♦ Daily recording: 6 sets of data; the longest, James Williams' Otter Loo, 20 years and counting
- ♦ 3 diet studies for Lowland river otters. (Bishop, Miranda et al., de la Hey)
- ♦ 3 studies of disturbance by engineering work, M5 bridge, Silk Mills Park & Ride, Taunton town centre makeover.
- ♦ Discovery of the bile fluke, and 2 papers, (Simpson et al., and Gentner).
- ♦ We were responsible for 2 out of the 4 rivers examined in the DNA feasibility study of the Environment Agency, Report (K Coxon et al.)
- ♦ We were the first to use the revised survey protocol recommended by Natura 2000 for SAC's (R. Axe, south coast).
- ♦ We completed our 'white square' for the 4th National otter survey.
- ♦ We have done a simultaneous survey of our whole county annually, by Two Day Events, for 14 years.
- ♦ We set up, and have contributed to, 7 Axe Valley Otter Surveys,
- ♦ Our surveys have provided population assessments of carrying capacity for the Tone, the Axe, and all Somerset.
- ♦ We helped with a corridor survey of all the bridges under the M5 in Somerset.
- ♦ We have helped with the provision of road mitigations and artificial holts.
- ♦ Historically, we contributed to studies of PCBs in fish, heavy metals in fish, and population studies of the R. Otter and the Somerset Levels.
- ♦ We provided many specimens for the post mortem programmes, Wildlife Veterinary Investigation Centre, & Cardiff Universities.

Currently, we are involved with several research projects:

- ♦ Fluke natural history and progression;
- ♦ Fluke DNA;
- ♦ Scent analysis from spraints;
- ♦ Post-mortems;
- ♦ the effects of Taunton town engineering;
- ♦ the otter population of the Brue Valley;

- ♦ the decline in otters in 2006.
- ♦ a book of reports, Current Otter Studies in Somerset, is in preparation.

Publications include:

- ♦ Bishop, diet on the Tone;
- ♦ de la Hey, predation on birds;
- ♦ Coxon et al, DNA feasibility study;
- ♦ Gentner, Fluke eggs in spraints;
- ♦ Gomm, effect of repairs to M5 bridge;
- ♦ Kobliseck et al, effects of engineering at Silk Mills;
- ♦ Miranda et al, dietary selection;
- ♦ Simpson et al, discovery of the bile fluke;
- ♦ SOG, Fisheries pamphlet;
- ♦ SOG, Surveyor's starter booklet;
- ♦ Waters, distribution on the R Brue;
- ♦ Williams, review of Brue records;
- ♦ Williams, The Otter Among Us.

International influence:

The methodology of our annual survey was requested for support in the setting up of a programme to monitor the Neotropical River Otter in Machu Pichu national park, in Peru; and an otter group along our lines is currently being formed in S. E. Peru, to involve local guides in the recording of the Giant Otters along the Madre de Dios river, a tributary of the Amazon.

THREE NARROW ESCAPES

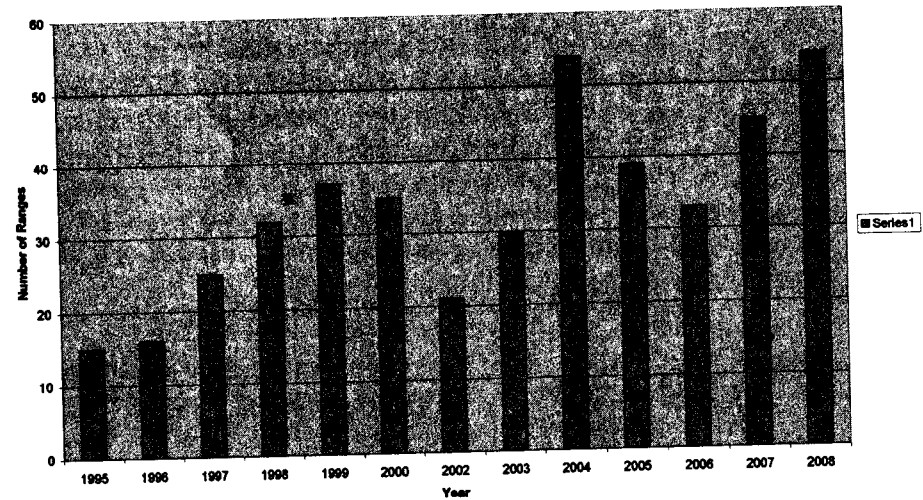
First day of the salmon fishing season, and Elizabeth Williams, glowing with optimism, plunged into the chilly waters of the Taw. Only a dozen casts, and the line tightened; a powerful surge took the line across the pool, a swirl, and up popped a brown furry head. Down it went, another power surge right across the Taw, and up came whiskers again. Elizabeth started to get agitated, and to signal frantically for James, apparently considering it more appropriate that he should be the one to get bitten by the cross otter. Back and forth it went, with Elizabeth's anxiety increasing, until a trick of the light enabled her to see a silvery shape alongside the brown one: she had indeed hooked a salmon, of course, and it was being chased round the pool by the daft teenager sub-adult otter, too immature to tackle so big a prey, even when it was obviously distressed. Well, so distressed was it, with Elizabeth at its front end, and a gurt predator close behind it, that it gave a mighty convulsion, and threw the hook. Relief all round; the salmon at escaping, Elizabeth/ James at not getting bitten, and the otter at not being hooked in the trousers.

The otter was the coolest. It carried on fishing, for more normal sized prey, and totally regardless of the etiquette that says one should never go into a pool and fish in front of another angler. Elizabeth just stood and watched, until chance brought the otter to the surface right at her feet. It stared for a second, then sank, rather than dived, and we neither of us saw it again.



Finally, two graphs of the overall results of the last Two Day Event in 2008. Let's see what this year's survey brings to light ..

Ajudicated ranges of Somerset Otters, taken from 2 Day Event surveys



Somerset Otter Group, 2 Day Events, % of sites checked and found with Otter evidence.

