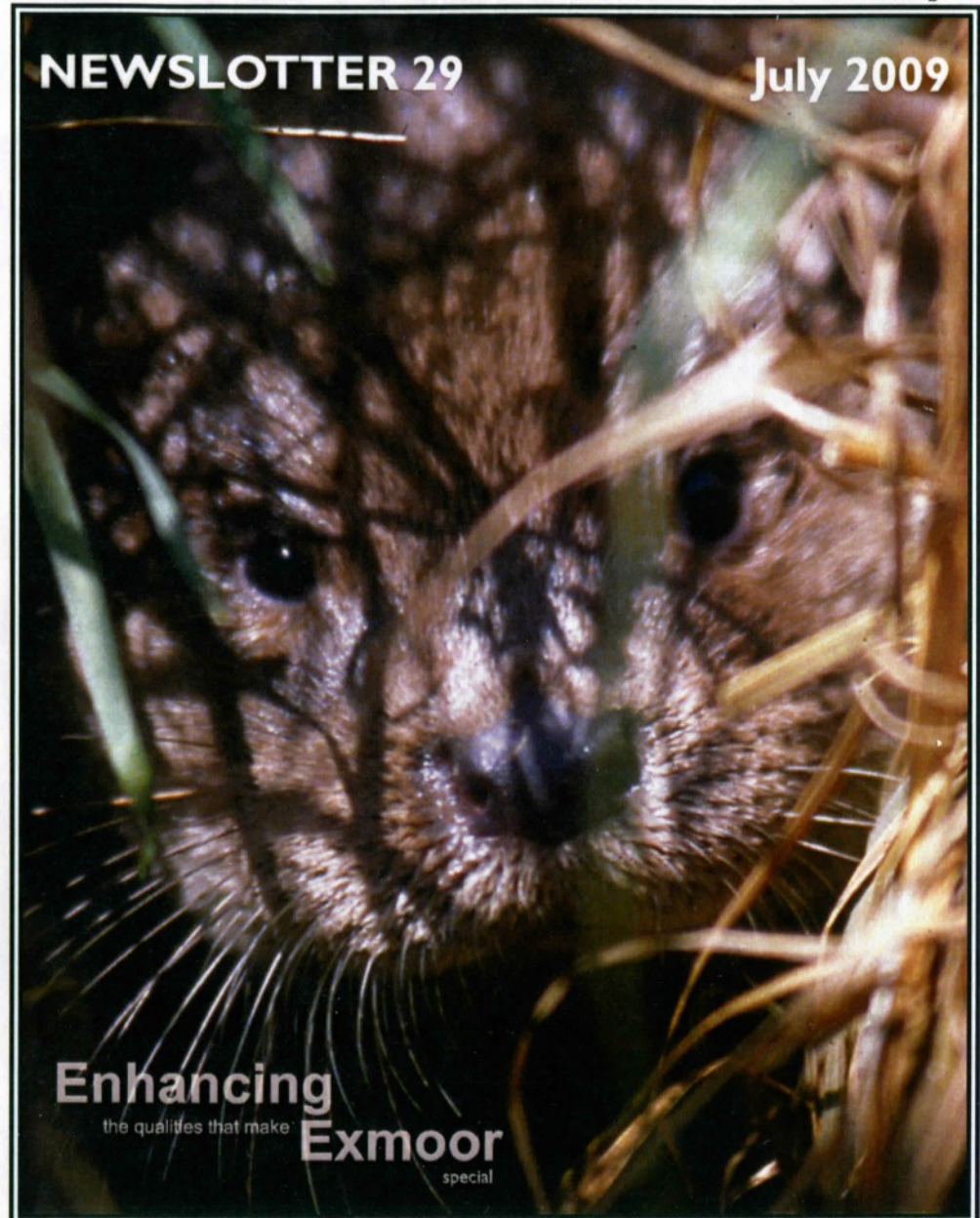




Somerset Wildlife Trust Otter Group

NEWSLOTTER 29

July 2009



Enhancing
the qualities that make **Exmoor**
special

EXMOOR OTTER SURVEY

INTRODUCTION

Every year the members of the Somerset Otter Group undertake a major two-day survey in the spring. In 2009, in response to the target laid down in the Exmoor National Park Management Plan, the Otter Group expanded the range covered to include all of the national park and associated streams. Although the presence of otters on Exmoor has been recorded for some time, this was the first attempt at a systematic survey of the population as a whole. In the early 1980s a zoologist was employed for a period to investigate the otters in the area but, as 1984 was the nadir of the otter population in the South West, he found little to report on.



Bitch otter in holt. Photo: Ian Anderson

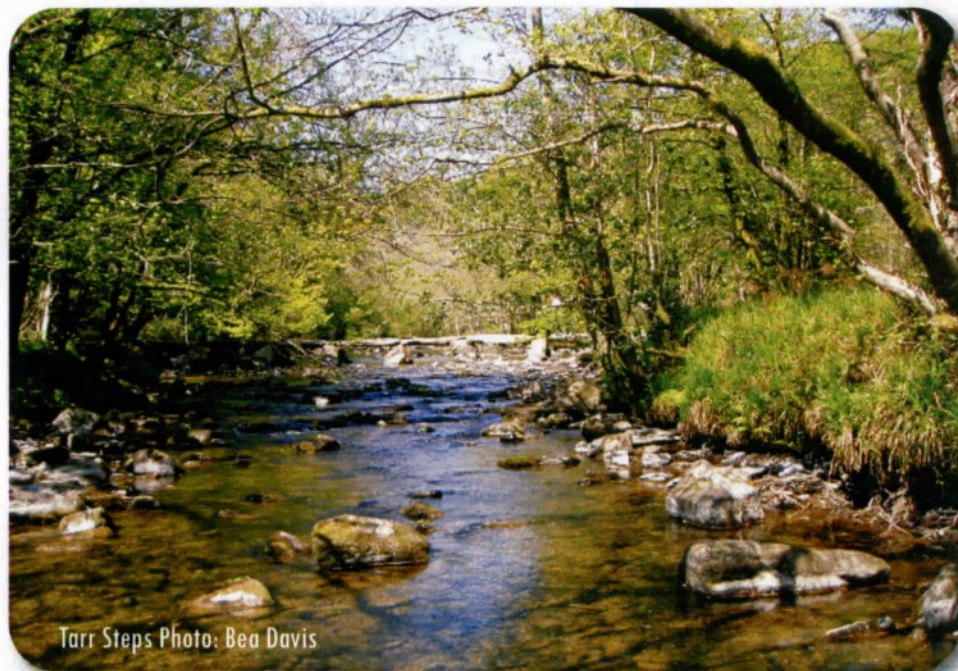
This was our first attempt at so large a survey; the results show that it was a great success, thanks to the conscientious efforts of the many participants. What each surveyor is asked to do is not very exciting or interesting by itself, especially if the patch does not contain an otter at the date selected, but together their efforts have given us a very informative and reassuring picture of the extent of the otter population in this important conservation area. And the fact that this pioneering survey of the National Park was incorporated into Somerset Otter Group's usual annual survey of the whole of the county of Somerset gives a set of values for comparison, not just from this year's survey, but from all the previous Somerset surveys. This enables us to evaluate the Exmoor result, and to see that it holds up as a valid statement of the otters' situation on Exmoor at this time.



Otter cubs by a holt.
Photo: Ian Anderson

Whereas large diurnal animals such as deer can be counted directly by sight, nomadic and nocturnal otters have to be monitored through signs, such as droppings or tracks. While the figures from this evidence form hard numerical data, there is a certain amount of subjective leeway in the interpretation of these clues into numbers of animals involved. However, the survey revealed 23 otters on Exmoor at least, possibly 26 if one is generous. This is a surprisingly high number: The Exmoor streams are

smaller and less fish-rich than the rivers of lowland Somerset, and this year there was a prolonged dry period in the spring which reduced the water levels. Yet the strong total, and the geographical spread of the findings, both indicate that Exmoor National Park is an important residential area for this rare species.



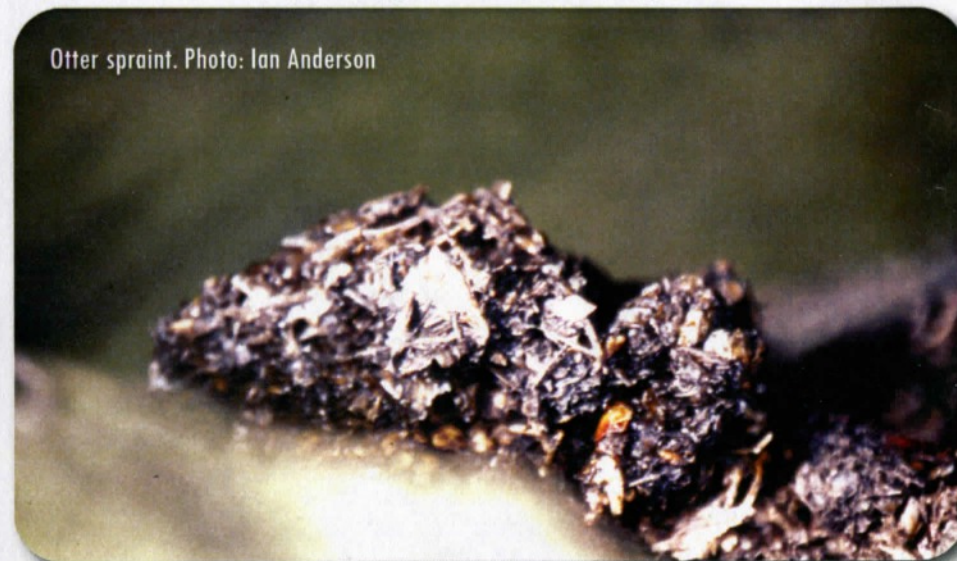
Tarr Steps Photo: Bea Davis

METHOD

In order to understand what was achieved, an introduction to our method and terminology is necessary. 136 surveyors took part, and each person, or pair, undertook to check a predetermined length of river (their "patch") on the two consecutive days selected for everybody. In each patch there are several "sites", places such as a bridge, a stream junction, or a weir. Energetic people may do a lengthy patch and look at a lot of sites, or even do more than one patch. Others may just check one site, in their garden, perhaps. The 136 people covered 142 patches, and looked carefully, twice, at an amazing 573 sites. 1176 sites checked in one weekend in one contiguous area of survey, in our case from Combe Martin in the north-west to Rode, near Trowbridge, in the east, must be a record. It is also the first such survey in any national park.

On the first day they record all the signs of an otter at each site. The main form of evidence is "spraint", or otter droppings, but there can also be "padding", or footprints. This year, because of the long period since there had been any sort of flood to wash spraints away, there was a lot of evidence at many places. On the second day, the surveyors check for new evidence, deposited in the intervening night. This way we can freeze the wanderings of the whole fluid otter population, by everybody checking the same night. Any form of fresh evidence from the night in question is called a "hit". A hit proves that an otter definitely passed that place since the day before. As they wander a long way, more than one patch may record hits from the nocturnal travel of one otter. This year, one restless animal near Bridgwater left hits along 10 km of river. This

Otter spraint. Photo: Ian Anderson



shows up when the results are mapped, and explains why the 44 hits and 10 "near misses" produced by the otters of Greater Exmoor boil down to just 23 different individual animals. A near miss is recorded when there is fresh evidence on Day 1, which, frustratingly, does not seem to be repeated on the second day; there was certainly an otter thereabouts, but it eluded the system. Because the boundary of the National Park is an arbitrary line which the otters do not know about, and because we had enough willing volunteers, we were able to extend the search outwards to places on related streams which are technically not in the

Park, but where the otters are nevertheless part of the same system or population. This we have called Greater Exmoor.

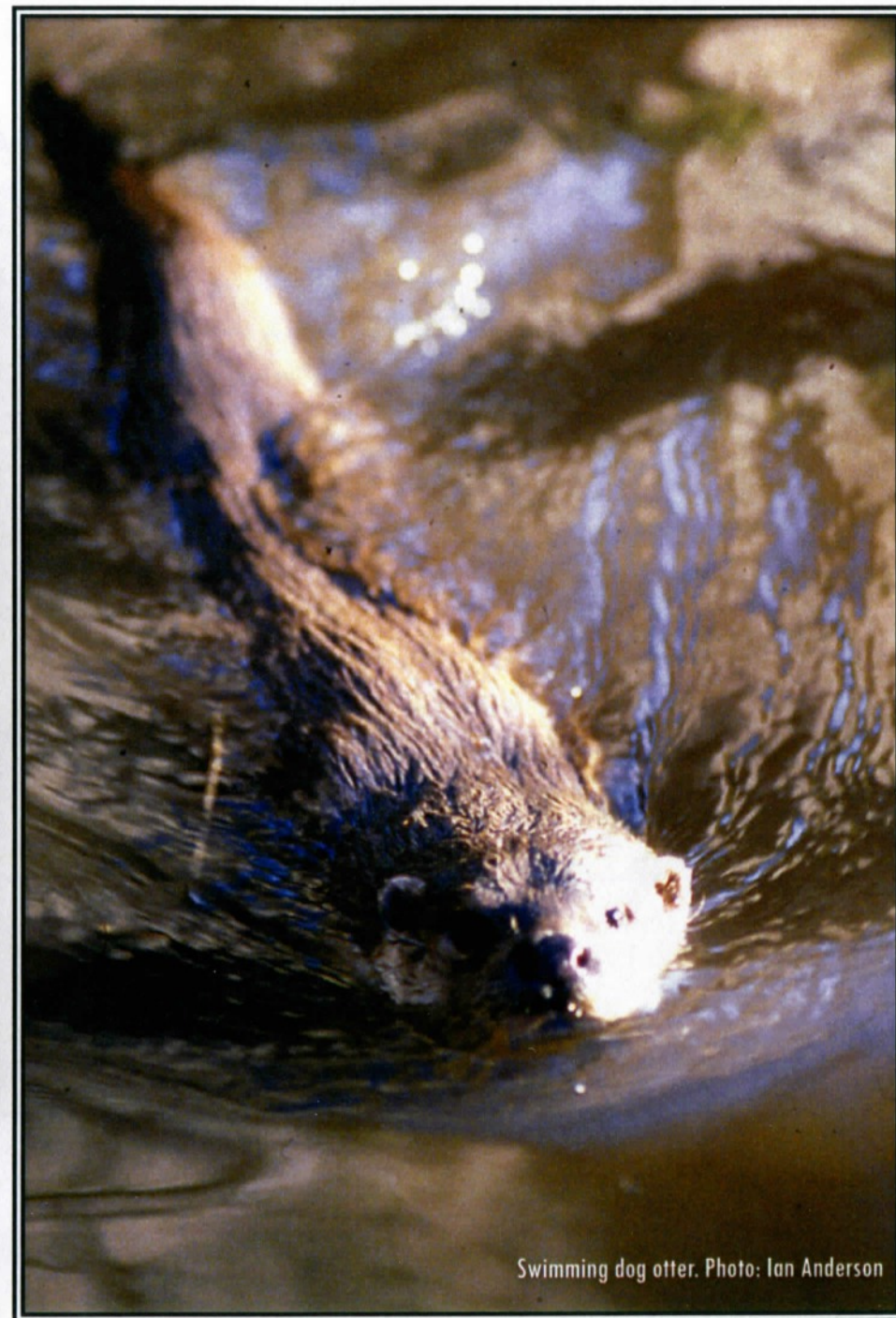
The map shows the area looked at, and the otters found. Our survey started at Combe Martin, on the River UMBER, and we included Clatworthy Reservoir and the top of the River Tone at the opposite corner. The table of scores shows that our coverage of the watery parts of this terrain was sufficiently thorough for there to be little likelihood of missing otters, and this is confirmed by the strong number located. It would have been surprising to have found many more; there just is not space enough for more of these territorial animals.

The following table gives the basic scores for the whole area:

EXMOORTOTALS

Total sites checked	189
Sites positive	151
% of Sites positive	81%
Hits	44
Near misses	10
Total score	54
Adjudicated ranges-maximum	26
Adjudicated ranges-minimum	23
% of total sites with hits	23%
% of positive sites with hits	29%
Blank Stretches	7

The information on which those totals were based becomes even more informative when looked at river by river: (see table in centre pages)

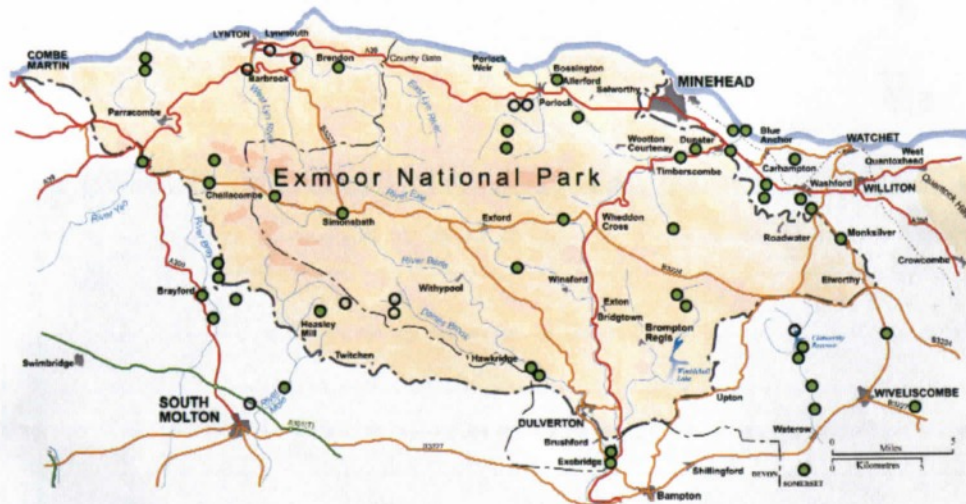


Swimming dog otter. Photo: Ian Anderson

Somerset Otter Group 2

Day Event April 2009 - Exmoor results

River	Location	+/-	Otters	Sites Ckd	Positive	Hits
Umber	Coombe Martin	0		1	0	0
Heddon	Hunters Inn	1	1	4	4	2
Taw Yeo	Wistland pound reserve	1	1	2	2	1
River Bray	Newtown	1	1	4	4	2
	Brayford	1				
	Holewater	1		5	3	2
	Challacombe	1	1	3	3	2
River Mole	Heasley Mill	0		3	2	0
	Bicknor/ N.Molton	1	1	6	6	1
	Fyldon	1	1	2	1	1
Mole Yeo	Twitichen Mill	0		1	0	0
Woody Bay/Lee Bay	Woody Bay area	0		9	0	0
Lyns	Lynmouth Confluence	0		1	0	0
	Lynmouth footbridge	NM	[1]	1	1	NM
West Lyn	Barbrook etc	NM		3	3	NM
	Hoarok/Farley	0		3	0	0
East Lyn	Watersmeet/Brendon	1	1	3	3	1
	Oare/Bodgworthy	0		3	0	0
Barle	Pinkery - Tarr Steps	1	1	5	5	2
	Danesbrook	0		4	3	3NM
	Castle Br- Marsh Br.	1	1	8	7	2
Exe	Headwater/Larcombe	1	1	7	3	1
	Little Exe - Quarne	1	1	9	9	1
	Exebridge	1	1	4	4	2
Haddeo	Haddeo Bury	0		3	2	0
	Hartford	0		4	4	0
	Wimbleball Dam	0		1	0	0
	Withiel Florey	1	1	5	5	2
Bathern		0		3	3	0
Bratton Stream		0		1	1	0
Hawcombe		2NM		5	5	2NM
Aller		1	1	5	4	2
Chetisford Water		0		2	1	0
Horne/Nutscale?		1	1	8	8	2
Avill		1	1[poss2]	11	10	5
Pill		1	1	6	5	1
Washford	Luxborough	1	1	4	4	1
	Roadwater/Cleve	1	1	5	4	2
	Bottom	0		0	0	0
Donniford	Top	0		7	7	0
	Bee Farm/Sampford	0		7	7	0
	Williton Stream	0		1	0	0
	Woodland	0		4	4	0
	Yard/Monks Silver	1	1	2	2	2
Tone	Halse Water/ Rooke N	1	1	1	1	1
	Clatworthy Tribs	NM		4	4	NM
	Clatworthy -Yeo	1	1[poss2]	5	5	5
	Hagley	1	poss 1	2	2	1
TOTALS		25 pos. 19neg	23/26	187	151	44 & 8 NM



- Otters located (hits)
- Otters known to be present (near misses)

Map provided by Exmoor National Park Authority

© Exmoor National Park Authority 2009

An explanatory comment is appropriate for some of those streams. The blanks are in a way the most interesting, or significant, part of such a survey; after all, it is fear of too many blanks that has been the motivation for all surveys of this rare animal. That there was a blank at Wimbleball Dam does not mean that no otters had used the reservoir; it means that no otter had recently marked besides the dam at the outflow into the Haddeo. The otters themselves seem to have been right up the headwaters at that time, well above the Haddeo. On the Washford, there was a bitch with young cubs upstream of the blank patch; until they are older, she will be using only a restricted part of her range, so the lower and more populated end had understandably not seen her for a while. Maternity duty also explains why the Doniford failed to come up with a resident. There had been a bitch with two cubs in the middle reaches until March, when one of the cubs was found dead at a farm near the top. Unfortunately the body was wanted for taxidermy, so we do not know the cause, but it may have been something aggressive, like a dog, because the bitch moved on upstream and crossed onto the Back Stream with the remaining cub. This was killed on the road near Bishops Lydeard in April; recently there was another road death in the area, but we did not get that body either, so do not know if the whole family has been eliminated. A resurvey in mid-June confirmed that there was still

no otter present on the Doniford.

On the Devon side, the three blank streams flowing into the sea have been checked again in June, and are still without any signs. Thanks to Jillie Leonard for doing that. This probably means that even with the resources of the sea, those three streams are too small to hold a resident. We ought to keep checking, however, in case they are used seasonally. The Heddon, on the other hand, has long been known to hold otters, and they have always gone right down to the tide. Our survey confirmed this. So the only real surprise was the lack of evidence at Twitchen, on the Mole Yeo, but the otter from that stream may well have been farther downstream: the survey site was very near the headwaters. The otter or otters on the Lyns proved unhelpful, and elusive; I wonder if we got a full result there. The map there shows a large empty zone, but it contains mainly small moorland streams like the Chalk Water, which may have been too low at such a dry time. But it would be illogical to expect many otters in total on the two Lyns; a comparison with other rivers in Somerset indicates that each animal needs a lengthy space, and the total available distance could not hold very many more than we found there, nor elsewhere. So the survey must be accounted a great success, and we have shown that the otters are making good use of the National Park.

One of the most encouraging findings is that there are otters up on the moor above others down in the more prosperous reaches. I had half expected to find that the moor was a place visited from time to time by otters whose main base was on the larger rivers. Martin McNeill sort of indicated that this might be to some extent the case, when his autumn survey result a few years ago found no evidence above Bridgetown. The theory was that it had been a difficult year for the salmon: Environment Agency surveys showed that they had not been able to run right up, and the otters had stayed down with them. But our survey this year reassuringly located otters above others on the Bray, the Mole, the Barle and the Exe. They must be resident on the moor, as they would be prevented from going down. We have not shown the social status of these otters, of course. It would be good to get some evidence of breeding up over the moor, to prove that there is a socially full population, and that the top-dwelling otters are not just dispersed

juveniles waiting for a more viable territory. There is no doubt, as comparison with the survey statistics for the rest of Somerset shows, that we have a more or less "full house" in our part of South West England. This means that there must be some otters having to scratch a living in less than optimal territory, forced into the margins by aggressive residential adults. That some of our moorland otters may fall into this category is perhaps indicated by the frequency with which we find road casualties on watershed roads like the North Devon link road. There are otters regularly crossing between catchments in search of a better living. These new results from the whole of Exmoor are of such great interest and value because this is the first such survey, but they were only part of the larger annual survey that the Somerset Otter Group undertakes, when they try to cover the whole of the county. The next chart gives the results for the wider area, and provides good points of comparison between catchments. To get a proper geographical picture from these figures, you should mentally put column 7 at the left hand end, as that then gives a correct progression from west to east, starting at the link road, and ending up by Mendip. The results show that there are still problems at the eastern end of our county; this was highlighted in the reports of the last two National Otter Surveys, and it is disappointing to find the same situation 9 years later. Of the 9 otters found in the Brue valley, 4 of them are one family, with two big cubs in process of dispersing. Farther east again, Tony House made a huge effort, and recruited a much larger team of volunteers, but it only served to point up the thinness of the population on the top of the Avon. It will be interesting to compare our results here with the next national survey later this year. SOG has recently found two new members in that area, both keen to undertake a survey, so we will try to concentrate on the Brue valley in the next 12 months.

It would be impossible to pay adequate tribute to all the many people who make a special effort in support of this massive undertaking, but a few can be selected as typical of what so many do. Dion Warner and Shelley Saltman were the only team to see an otter this year, but they deserve it, seeing how many sites they do for us. First result in came from Bob and Camilla Perry, on the Doniford, who clocked in at noon on the Monday. If only everybody could be so quick, and catch the post in

the first week; the last form was received on 16th June. This spread of time makes for a massive amount of work at HQ. Jodey Peyton and Pete Stronach again came back to Somerset for the event, this time from Oxford; they recorded 20 and 16 spraints at 2 adjacent sites.

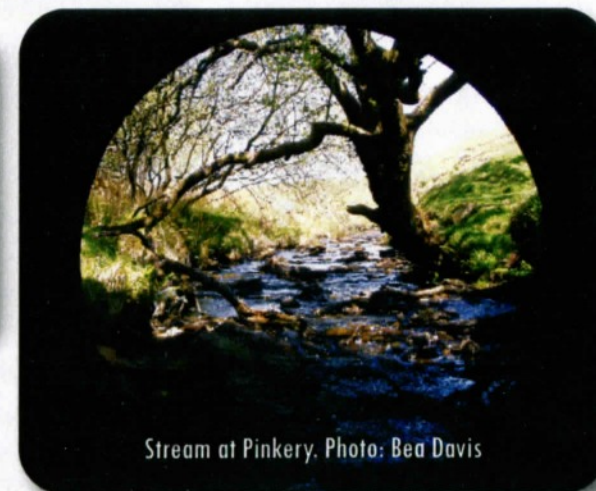
Long service and loyalty medals go to Cle Boyd, the first secretary and a founding member of SOG, congratulations on your 90th birthday, to Carol Bailey, who undertook to do extra sites to prevent a gap, to Denis Pavey and Richard Littlejohns, who have been so reliable for so long, to

Somerset Otter Group 2 Day Event - results 2009

	Full Surv.	Som	G. Exmoor	Somerset						Extras	
				1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Total Sites	573	520	189	128	129	11	137	86	29	53	N/S
Sites Pos	414	381	151	110	91	10	100	49	21	33	
% sites Pos	72%	73%	80%	86%	71%	90%	73%	57%	72%	62%	
Sites with hits	107	95	44	28	24	5	25	12	1	12	
% sites with hits	19%	18%	23%	22%	19%	45%	18%	14%	3%	23%	
% positives with hits	26%	25%	29%	25%	26%	50%	25%	24%	5%	36%	
Hits	107	95	44	28	24	5	25	12	1	12	
Near Misses	20	17	10	6	3	1	4	2	1	3	
Reasonable Suspicion	3	2	0						2		
Success Score	130	114	54	34	27	6	29	14	4	15	
OTTERS LOCATED	66/67	58/59	23	13	13	4	15	9[10]	4	8	[2]
Patches	142	129	43	28	33	5	27	27	9	13	
Blank Patches	13	10	5	2	2	0	1	3	2	3	

Chart Codes

Exe/N.Coast	1
Tone	2
S.Coast	3
Parrett/Isle	4
Brue Valley	5
Bristol Avon	6
Exmoor in Devon	7
North Somerset	8



Stream at Pinkery. Photo: Bea Davis

those who organise local meetings, Martin McNeill, Margaret Davis, Shelley Saltman, Lyn Southway, and to Caroline Jones, who got the Devon side up and running so well, first time off.

However strong the turnout, we inevitably miss an otter or two. This year we had to allow for three, and one was probably lurking just over our boundary, where the Parrett Yeo passes briefly through Dorset at Sherborne. Last year we claimed to know of 61 otters located, and estimated another 4; this year, despite a weak result in the east, we found 59 and are allowing for 3. The ongoing series of annual surveys is consistently producing figures which indicate that Somerset has space for about 65 territorial otters at present.

The Somerset otter group was involved as usual in another survey, that of the River Axe, south coast.

AXE VALLEY OTTER SURVEY:

APRIL 2009

This year's spring survey was done at a time of low water after a long dry spell, which had boosted the amount of recent evidence to be found, unlike 2008, when there had been a recent spate. The drying wind made it tricky to be sure of the freshness of spraints which had been exposed all night, but the final results show that we are getting it right, and that the Axe is holding its otters, at a level which we seem to monitor steadily and consistently.

We looked at 73 sites, the lowest number of all our surveys. This partly reflects that experienced surveyors are rationalising their patches, by omitting dud sites, and partly that we had a couple of major gaps this year. However, as the final results are expressed as percentages, the lower total sites does not matter in itself, although the gaps could well have been significant in assessing the number of individual animals involved. 52 of the sites had otter evidence, that is 71%; this is mainly the result of the continued low water, and contrasts with last year's 49%. It is the sort of figure that the Somerset Otter Group steadily gets on its annual 2Day Event; if the percentage went much higher there would, I think, be a danger that we were not looking at enough sites to be sure of finding all the fresh work.

This year produced 16 hits. Our average is 20, or 18 if one discounts the exceptionally high score for the first year. Given the two omissions and one known otter, (on the Yarty), which escaped us, that is a reassuring score. When entered on the map, and adjudicated, it came out as a maximum of 11 otters, plus two probables, and a minimum of 8: our averages are 10 and 7. The minimum is worked out as one otter for each of, Estuary/Bruckland; Borcombe; Umborne; Yarty (known but not found); Sector/Axminster; Smallridge/Weycroft/Kitt; Perry St/Forde Abbey; Winsham/Wayford/Synderford. Most of the fresh hits were on side streams - that is what one expects at times of low water. I have adjudicated that there was an otter at the top of the Umborne, above the top site looked at. Similarly, the pattern of evidence points to there being one up the Coly/ Offwell, an important area missed out this year. The Corry was also not done. There has been a bitch with 2 cubs at the top of the Yarty, although there is an unconfirmed report that one of the cubs was run over near Marsh. The plentiful recent evidence points to their presence, presumably in the 7km gap we do not have an adequate checking site on; this needs looking into before the autumn survey.



Otter profile. Photo: Ian Anderson

Much more worrying is the consistently poor result from the Blackwater, and the fact that there was only one recent spraint above Wayford, in a dry year when evidence seemed long lasting. That is approximately 14 kms of empty habitat. The river at Broadwindsor was not fully examined, but there was no recent work nearby to suggest that we missed anything there. This may be a confirmation of the verbal report that two otters were run over between Clapton and Hewish in March. In 2007 I recorded 4 dead otters from this catchment, in 2008 none, but this year, in the first 5 months, I have 5, 2 definites and 3 probables. The most recent one was a bitch killed at Lambert's Castle in May, presumably crossing from the Char to the Blackwater, or vice versa.

If we accept the maximum of 11, add the 2 probables in the omitted areas, and allow 1 for the Clapton deaths, there may have been 14 otters on the catchment in March. That is the maximum we recorded in our best year, and it may be that that is the carrying capacity of adults for the Axe system.

Officers

Chairman:

James Williams

Secretary:

Lucy Mead

Recorder (all Survey Forms):

Karen Coxon

Newsletter editor:

Patrick McCormack

Front cover: Bitch otter in grasses. Photo Ian Anderson