



Officers

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## EDITORIAL

Dear Member -

After one of the coldest winters on record, it is so good to see evidence of spring. Finally the blossom is coming out (good news for my bees), the buzzards in the oak opposite are turning their thoughts to breeding and the days are getting longer. So it must also be time for a Two Day Event! Read on for details of this year's jamboree and our other activities.

Best wishes

*Patrick*

## Calendar of Events

Date	Event	Location & Contact
Mon 15 March	TONE	World's End, Bradford-on-Tone, 7pm Margaret Davis, <a href="mailto:fifibint@yahoo.co.uk">fifibint@yahoo.co.uk</a>
Mon 22 March	EXMOOR / N. COAST	Rest & Be Thankful, Wheddon Cross, 7:30pm M McNeill <a href="mailto:martin.mcneill@luxborough.com">martin.mcneill@luxborough.com</a>
Thu 25 March	PARRETT	White Hart, Martock March, 7pm Shelley Saltman <a href="mailto:s.saltman@westdorset-dc.gov.uk">s.saltman@westdorset-dc.gov.uk</a>
Mon 29 March	NORTH EAST / AVON	Mason's Arms, Frome, 7pm Tony House <a href="mailto:tony.house311@btopenworld.com">tony.house311@btopenworld.com</a>
Wed 31 March	BRUE VALLEY	Ring o'Bells, Ashcott, 7pm Jo Pearse <a href="mailto:jopearse@yahoo.co.uk">jopearse@yahoo.co.uk</a>
Wed 7 April	Training walk	Simonsbath car park, 10:30am <a href="mailto:bdavis@exmoor-nationalpark.gov.uk">bdavis@exmoor-nationalpark.gov.uk</a>
Sat 10 April	AXE VALLEY SURVEY	
24-25 April	<b>TWO DAY EVENT</b>	County-wide Please use the standard forms!
Wed 5 May	<b>All Two Day Event forms should be in the post</b>	
Fri 7 May	OTTER TALK James Williams	West Hatch Village Hall 7:30pm
Sun 22 August	Natural England's OTTER DAY	Shapwick Heath

## Two-Day Event, April 24-25, 2010:

The Otter Group's big spring survey will be on 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> April this year. The Two-Day Event has now been held annually for 15 years, and the accumulated data is building a good understanding of the status of this keystone species across the county.

It is important that we get enough volunteers this year to answer several important questions.

- Is the species still doing better in the west than the east of Somerset?
- Has the increase in deaths in the central Brue valley had an effect on the numbers there?
- What damage to the population as a whole is the new Bile Fluke disease having?

We know from the post mortems that it is affecting several of our scarce otters badly, so we need to ascertain the strength of the population as a whole in the areas where it is most prevalent. Was the picture of the otter population in the Exmoor National Park, which we surveyed fully for the first time last year, a typical and sustainable one?

The objective is to cover the whole of the waterways in the county. Each volunteer is given a stretch, and asked to cover it twice, on Saturday and Sunday. That way we can map the whereabouts of this nomadic animal on the intervening night. There is a special form to complete, but we would also welcome any chance observations from the public at that period. Those that want to help should try to attend one of the catchment-based planning meetings.

## OUR ACHIEVEMENTS

## Surveys

The Otter Group had a very positive and successful 2009. We carried out a world-record sized survey of all the rivers from the N Devon link road to Mendip, and even beyond. This was our 15<sup>th</sup> Two Day Event. There was a well attended training day for this at Simonsbath, organised by Caroline Jones of Devon Biological Records Centre. I hope you have all seen and admired the lovely special edition of the Newsletter which Exmoor National Park staff designed and produced for us as part of their contribution to the big survey, which gave for the first time a complete and simultaneous overview of a National Park's otter population. Several of our members also contributed as usual to the Axe Valley Otter Survey. All this in addition to the regular monthly base-line survey work which so many of you do so reliably, often without much acknowledgement: Thanks to all you regulars, here and now!



## Meetings

We have had two fascinating and well-supported meetings. The first featured the complete otter project team from Cardiff University, who explained their intricate scientific work; "100 things to do with a dead Otter" might be an appropriate shorthand summary. At our second meeting Dr Robert Williams gave a detailed insight into the problems of his Otter Surveys, into the Giant Otter population of Peru. He has about twice as many otters to check as we do, but they are spread across an area about  $\frac{3}{4}$  the size of England, and his problems include death threats from illegal loggers, and having to avoid uncontacted, blowpipe-armed tribes, living along some of the remoter rivers in the Amazon Rainforest. At both meetings there was then a massive buffet supper, put on by Lucy Mead and her mother and her sister, Margaret. They worked very hard and produced a delicious spread at a remarkably low cost.

## Research

So, as a result of these two events, and the recently introduced joining fee of £10, we have already raised enough money to cover our first year's financial contribution to the doctorate study at Cardiff. Eleanor Sherrard-Smith is to be congratulated on her successful bid for the basic funding for a three year study into the life cycle of, and threats associated with the Bile Fluke, first discovered here in Somerset. Part of the reason the bid was accepted is that it is a partnership with our Group; we assist with sampling in the field, and a modicum of cash support. Eleanor is to be congratulated on winning the academic poster competition for all biology projects in the university. That this important investigation is overdue is pointed up by Eleanor's discovery of another, similar parasite in dead otters sent for post mortem. The post mortem programme is another aspect of the Cardiff Otter Project's work that we have supported strongly.

## Further finance

Excellent news that thanks to generous sponsorship from Mrs Julia Sharp, Mrs Wendy Steward, (USA), Young's Brewery, and the Wessex Watermark Award, we now have enough in the bank to ensure the full three year's worth of research. We have also installed a deep freeze at the Natural England base at Shapwick Heath NNR, to gather in otters, mink and any other relevant species for research projects. The mink are to be shared between Exeter and Cardiff Universities.

## ACTIVITIES

### SOG's research

We have interesting works in progress here in Somerset. A small team led by Emma Daniel is looking into the effects of all the engineering work going on along the river in Taunton on the otters of the Tone. Paul Parker is investigating the Blackdowns Headwaters: the Culm, Yarty, Otter and a tributary of the Tone all rise near each other, back to back, on the summit of the Blackdown Hills, near the Holman Clavel Pub.

We know from records in the past that otters cross from one to the other, but it would be interesting to know just how much of this goes on. As 2009 was the year of the 5<sup>th</sup> National Otter Survey, we decided to "do" the white square between Dunster and Glastonbury, an important otter stronghold which is never included in the official survey, as that looks only at the black squares on the chessboard map of England. It was omitted from the first three, but we covered it last time, so will have a set of records for comparison. It is not as big a job as one might imagine, as you already surveyed 62 of the 95 sites during the Two Day Event. In the event, the square was the first square to be fully completed, and the only one, when last I heard, to have recorded every one of the 25 10x10 km. squares positive.

In conjunction with this, I hope to look in some detail at the Brue valley, to try to find out what goes on away from the 'celeb' otters in the central nature reserves which pose so confidently and frequently for Alison Hickman's excellent photos. The statistics from the last national survey were worrying, and there has been some cause for real concern since then, as the Brue was hardest hit of all our rivers in the disaster year of 2006. It did not return a very strong result this year, either.

A further source of worry is that we have recently had no fewer than seven dead otters between Catcott and Street, and another which was seen to be very sick. It may well be lying dead in the reed beds somewhere; there can be no doubt that in that area of extensive marshes we must miss a lot of what happens. But we will be as well informed as is possible, since Alison Hickman has started a series of co-ordinated otter watches across the whole central area of the nature reserves. Visit [www.ottersonthelevel.co.uk](http://www.ottersonthelevel.co.uk). The bile fluke is implicated in some of these deaths; a bitch found dead in Ham Wall reserve was in a terrible state, but another otter, although it had no gall bladder left, was in a plump state of health. Danny de la Hey has recently started a part-time doctorate to follow up the excellent work he did on otter diet out on the levels, looking especially at feathers in spraints as an indicator of bird predation. **Important As part of this project, he is putting out bait with coloured plastic markers in them. Please let him know at once if you notice any of these.** Linley Hunter has been looking at otter diet on the Tone for his dissertation.

All this activity has rather held up the production of our set of research papers, but rest assured that has not been entirely neglected, and is progressing well, if a bit more slowly than I intended.

## Reorganisation

One of the things which slowed things down was the drawn out return of the Two Day Event forms. Quite why so many delay so long I am not sure – the last form to be included came in on 16<sup>th</sup> June! Having to chase so many involves a lot of admin time and phone calls etc, and delays the scoring process. I have decided that the survey is now too big to be managed from "central control", although of course the scoring needs to be done in one place, for consistency, and for the writing up afterwards. Accordingly we need to find a new system: my suggestion is that the



catchment co-ordinators not only run the local meetings to allocate the patches and to avoid duplications, but that the forms should in the first instance go back to them. That way, each area will have only a few to chase, and then the whole batch can be sent in promptly for processing. Some people have wanted to send all the results in electronically. I am sure that, in theory, that is the ideal solution, but to be really effective we would need to devise a package for processing the scores in the machine.

Those who do not have computers would have to have their forms typed in by somebody. And it would be a very big step to produce the map, although perhaps that would be best done by hand, as a quality check afterwards: several of you are very erratic over 6 figure grid references. (I disapprove of 10 figure ones, which try to be accurate to 50 cms, half the length of an otter.) Anyway, I would be glad to hear opinions or suggestions on the best new method, in plenty of time before we start again, planning for **April 24th and 25<sup>th</sup> 2010**.

### Survey analysis

Another scheme which has not yet come to fruition is the proposed rapid analysis of each quarters results. We await news from SERC that the new machine is fired up and running properly, or even that delivery has finally occurred. The need status for this facility was elevated from 'desirable' to 'urgent' when we belatedly recognised the disastrous figures for all our monitoring methods in 2006, using old-fashioned pencil and fag-packet technology. Had that problem continued into the following years our otter population would be looking very thin by now. Because we recognised it so late, we have no idea what the problem was, and did nothing about it. That we need to be able to react more rapidly is emphasised by two big areas of worry at present, the Brue Valley, (as explained above), and the steady recent decline in the Axe Valley Survey scores.

### JULY MEETING - GIANT OTTERS OF PERU

Dr Robert Williams is the scientific director of all the research and conservation work in Peru of the prestigious Frankfurt Zoological Society, the World's oldest conservation body. When not counting Condors, trying to radio-collar Andean Cats at an altitude of about 17000 ft, or getting troops in to remove illegal loggers from the rainforest, he runs the annual survey of Peru's Giant Otters.

Peru holds one of the last three large populations, but as these splendid animals depend on Oxbow lakes for breeding, there are not many of them, and they are well scattered. So the annual count involves long journeys up jungle rivers in motorised canoes, camping at night on the sand banks. The otters are under considerable threat; the high price of gold has brought thousands of (legal) artisanal miners into the forests, where they trash the riverbank's silt deposits. And to make matters worse, they then use mercury to process their ore. 80% of the fish in one local market were found by scientists to be unfit for human consumption. The

government is loth to put the brakes on such a wealth producing activity which is lifting the living standards of thousands of desperately poor people. But the main industry of Peru is tourism, especially eco-tourism, and eco-tourists want to see giant otters. This puts further pressure on the breeding family groups. Without tourism, they would be worthless, and unprotected; but tourism puts heavy stress on them. Robert tries to implement management by zones: up to here for tourists; beyond here, otters only. But happy snappers try to bribe the guides to stretch the boundaries a bit, for a better shot.

Robert and his team also photograph them, but from a safer distance with bigger lenses. The aim is to identify each animal by the pattern of creamy spots on its chin. (The huge number of Black Cayman in these fish rich lakes mean that the otters and the people have to be strictly diurnal). Over the years they have started to built up a detailed history of the population and its social relationships, and they are getting the local people onside, to consider the otters as an asset to be cherished rather than fishing competition to be eliminated, or trapped for skins. If only we had a method of getting to know our otters so well. But Peru is copying our volunteer methodology, and has started an "Otter Group", so that camp staff and boatmen can send in sightings, and the animals will be followed at other times of the year than the September surveys.

He introduced his talk by a series of tantalising slides which led us down from the high Andes into the lowland regions of the Amazonian Rainforest. These glimpses were enough to show that there is much more of fascination to come from Peru, the most Bio-diverse country in the world, and we hope to get him back to show us some more of the wildlife treasures of that remarkable place.

### ANGLING ANXIETIES

#### Carping at otters

There has been much hostility in parts of the angling press recently against otters, which have 'cleaned out whole stretches of river', and are alleged to have made some carp fishing venues no longer economically viable. Most of this journalism was ill-informed, sensational, and very selective. No mention of the carp being an imported fish at the limit of its range; no mention of the protist, a type of lethal, carp-special parasite. No mention of the recent vast influx of central European workers, for whom carp is an acceptable, rather luxury food. No, it's all the otters what done it.

In a natural river, with a wide range of fish at normal density, an otter will take the easier prey items, and can take large carp only when the water is cold. In a specially stocked match fishing lake, with a high density of large specimens of the more desirable angling species, it can of course become a nuisance. Just as hens require a hen run against the foxes, so such places need to be protected against otters. Electric fencing is a great deterrent to a wet otter.



Our county is a prime area for recreational angling, a fact that this group has recognised by producing, some years ago, a pamphlet for fishery owners, which includes internet contacts for fencing designs. We should all be very vigilant for murmurings against otters, and try to get somebody out with helpful advice. The EA now has recently published its own booklet, too, so there is really no excuse for aggrieved anglers, wound up by sensational journalism, to talk about killing the otters.

### BIRTHS & DEATHS

In 2009 we recorded 36 deaths in Somerset, and another 7 technically ours, being on associated streams, but located just over the boundary. This is a higher than average score. Thanks to the efforts of many members, Shelley Saltman, Lucy Mead, John Crispin and the Dixons, for example, we sent 24 of them to Cardiff for post mortem. We supplied over 10% of the dead specimens from all England, a record we would be happy to pass to another county. Cubs are more difficult to count, as one litter may be reported several times, from slightly different places as the bitch moves them around. My best guess is for 22 different litters last year, plus 4 others scored as 'to be confirmed'.

### \*\* STOP PRESS \*\*

March 11, and a major crash resulted near Shepton Mallet after a car slowed to avoid an otter on the A361. The car and two aggregate lorries collided and one driver was injured; the otter was killed. With London-bound traffic on the A303 being diverted over the A361, this stretch of road will be increasingly busy in the coming months. Drivers - and otters- beware.

### ROAD MITIGATIONS

Lucy Mead has analysed all the long list of casualties for the last 15 years, which pointed up the worst places for repeated road kills, and we have advised on several bad 'Black Spots'. The EA has made good improvements at Loxhole Br., Dunster, and Blind Man's Sluice near Othery. The underpass they installed at Beer Wall, near Aller, is being used, but more netting is needed there to finish the job off. The reflectors at East Lyng are still being waited for. We hope also to have a new set of reflectors near Bishops Lydeard. A major new problem occurred near Burrow Mump, where 3 otters were killed in a month. The cause seems to be that the deliberate flooding of the wash fields, for conservation purposes, brings the otters too close to the main road at a place where it is inviting to them to cross. I hope this is being fenced.

♦ ♦