Somerset Wildlife Trust Otter Group

NEWSLOTTER 31 September 2010

Officers

Chairman:	James Williams
Secretary:	Lucy Mead
Recorder (all Survey Forms):	Karen Coxon
Newslotter editor:	Patrick McCormack

NEXT MEETING, October 28, 2010:

Thur 28th October: "A Celebration of the Achievements of the Somerset Otter Group." The Science Block, Wellington School, South Street, WELLINGTON, TA2 8NT, OS ref ST138203. Go through the archway on South Street and head for the far end of the sports field; parking is outside the Science Block.

The research team from Cardiff will be giving a brief update on the vital work that we are supporting, and Wessex Water will present a cheque for £1,000 towards this. 7.15 for 7.30 start, buffet supper, £5 per person, RSVP to Lucy Mead, (lucy@lucky8.wanadoo.co.uk).

Another date for your diary is **Tue 23rd November**, when James Williams will give a talk to the Wells SWT Group. 7:30pm, Wells Museum, Cathedral Green.

TWO DAY EVENT - James Williams

For this year's survey 136 teams looked for signs of otters at 584 places, on two consecutive days, as usual. The results were very encouraging: only eight teams failed to find any evidence, which indicates that Somerset still has a widespread otter population, despite the continuing prevalence of the new parasitic bile fluke. 73% of the sites held otter evidence, and 16% showed that an otter had been there on the Saturday night. Interpretation of all this information suggested that we located 66 territories, plus a few others in the areas we missed out. These gaps are mainly in the south and east of the county, so we would be glad to get more volunteers for next year's survey, which will be held one week earlier, on 17th &18th April, 2011. It would be good to have a fuller coverage in those areas, to ascertain whether, as we think, the otters are still less strongly distributed in the east than the west.

For the second year we included the whole of Exmoor National Park, where we found the same number of occupied ranges, 24, plus two to be assumed from gaps.

At a time of increasing agitation against otters by a small but vociferous section of the coarse fishing community, it is very valuable to have some indication of the actual numbers of these predators, to keep things in proportion. And it is good for people to realise just how few individual animals constitute our "strong" population. Otters are scarce animals, and therefore always vulnerable. Thanks and congratulations to all who helped with this valuable weekend.

That this report is so late is due to the difficulty we had in getting a sufficient proportion of the scores in to start the scoring process. Time which should have been devoted to the writing-up process had to be diverted to chasing up the forms.

The 2011 Two Day Event will be on 16th and 17th April.

Note that this is a week earlier than usual, in order to avoid Easter and the May bank holidav weekend.

Table 1: Summary of results by Catchment

	Catchment	Min	Probs	Totals	Possibles	Max
1	Exmoor in Somerset	14	4	18	2	20
2	Tone	13	3	16	1	17
3	S Coast	2	1	3		3
4a	Isle / Parrett	10	2	12	6	18
4b	Cary / King's SD	1	1	2		2
5	Brue	6	3	9	1	10
6	Axe (North)	3		3		3
7	Bristol Avon	3		3		3
	Totals	52	14	66	10	76

Table 2: Summary of results for Greater Exmoor

Greater Exmoor	Min	Probs	Totals	Possibles	Max
Somerset	14	4	18	2	20
Devon	13	2	15		15
Top of Tone	1		1		1
Totals	18	6	24	2	26

Tables 3-4, Percentages

Area	Positives	Total sites	%
Somerset	380	521	73%
Devon	57	63	90%
Greater Exmoor	161	205	79%
Full survey	598	789	76%

Area	Hits	Total sites	%
Somerset	109	521	21%
Devon	7	63	11%
Greater Exmoor	43	205	21%
Full survey	159	789	20%

Area	Hits	Positives	%
Somerset	109	380	29%
Devon	7	57	12%
Greater Exmoor	43	161	27%
Full survey	159	598	27%

MAJOR POLLUTION INCIDENT

Alison Hickman alerted us to a bad pollution of the Glastonbury Canal, a major tributary of the South Drain,(Brue catchment), on 6th February. It joins the South Drain within Ham Wall RSPB reserve, and then flows on through the Shapwick Heath NNR. A worse place for a disaster would be hard to imagine. Simone Gentner and I went over on 9th February to see for ourselves. The EA were on the case, tracing the cause, which I understand was some kind of timber treatment fluid emanating from a wood yard. The slowly flowing canal was full of dead fish; we estimated about 300 in the short stretch we looked at, all Rudd, and all adults. We found no tiddlers. We could not find any other species, although the pollutant was still active, because some of the fish drifting into our area were still alive, but dying. Scores of gulls were feeding on the dead ones, so there would have been more bodies originally.

Our main concern was the effect this might have on the otters which might have been expected to join in the feast, especially the juveniles regularly seen on the reserve by John Crispin. We found only one indication of that, a place where the steep bank had been scraped bare of vegetation and scuffed up over an area of a metre by a half metre, at least. There was one spraint on it, and some fish scales and bits beside it. It did not resemble a castling, nor was the spraint very prominent, but it was fresh and we found small padding on it.

Two days later, on the 11th, Lucy Mead accompanied me, to look for further otter evidence, and to help with the collection of three dozen dead fish for Eleanor Sherrard-Smith at Cardiff, to check them for intermediate stages of the fluke. We found no more otter work, and fewer fish, probably because of the gulls. All the gulls seemed very chipper, and we could see no dead ones on the nearby lake. So it may just have been a coincidence that Alison found a dead swan just downstream a couple of days later, but she was appalled at the lack of interest by the various authorities. After a lot of effort over the phone she managed eventually to get it collected for testing by DEFRA, but as the chap commented, "there is no reason to suppose it has got bird flu," she did not think they had quite focussed on the real problem.

I discussed the fact that all the fish were of one species with Patrick Lehain; he pointed out that Rudd are top water fish, not bottom feeders; if the chemical floated on the surface, other types would not ingest it. I speculated that if the substance was irritating, it might be that the roughed-up batch of peat was the result of an otter trying to rub its mouth to get rid of a burning sensation after grooming its fur, perhaps. News of the swan might throw light on this, but so far we have heard nothing.

Otter records from that area have been very infrequent by their usual standards recently. Quite apart from any damage this pollution may have caused to them, (and we have no evidence of any, only my speculations), SOG has recorded 7 dead

otters thereabouts between August 2008 and January 2010, plus two farther upstream on the Brue, and another one seen to be very sick in the snow, but not picked up. Ten deaths in a year and a half are bound to reduce any population. One good result was that we discovered that Natural England had no freezer for the storage of dead specimens, so SOG has donated one. It was immediately useful for the dead mink from the spring mink raft programme, which go to Exeter University, where they do mink population research, and then on to Cardiff for their fluke.

BIRTHS & DEATHS

The last time that we had a long period of dry weather in the summer, we had an unexplained boom in otter casualties, which are usually at their lowest in July. We were sufficiently worried to put out a press release. As hot weather also brings out bluebottles, we did not get any of the summer bodies to post mortem, and can only guess at what happened. I suspected that blue-green algae might have been implicated, pernicious to an animal which grooms itself a lot.

However, this year has been different, and reported otter deaths have been encouragingly low. There was a flurry in March, perhaps as a result of the wet weather, but to 1st August I have recorded only nine deaths in Somerset, the latest one on 10th April. This is a very unusual pattern. However, in North Somerset, they have had a bad year. They have lost eight otters since 3rd of November, which is very drastic for an area with fewer otters than us.

Births are up, it seems. In the first seven months, I have had reports of 13 different sets of cubs.

AN OTTER MYSTERY SOLVED - Jilly Leonard

On the Sunday of the Two Day Event it appeared that I had two otters on my patch the previous night.

One had crossed Porlock Marsh and travelled up Hawkcombe Water; the other had appeared at Nutscale Reservoir. As there was no sign of the latter having travelled up Horner Water to get to the reservoir, I assumed it had come down Chettisford water to get there.

After talking to Ruth Hyett, who surveys that area, I was left puzzled. She had found no sign of an otter travelling downstream, and as I had no signs of one travelling upstream, how had this otter suddenly popped up at Nutscale?

I remembered that Janet Dixon and James Williams had always said that otters will travel overland to get from one river system to another, and I had my suspicions about the first otter in Hawkcombe Water. Its trail had gone cold two-thirds of the way up the valley, just below a stream junction, and this had happened to me before on other surveys at this site.

Had the otter gone up the sidestream, over the watershed and into Horner Water? If so, it would have reappeared above my highest checkpoint on that river, and could have missed detection. I decided to find out!

Next day, on the Monday, after rechecking all my major sites, I headed to this previously unsurveyed section above Nutscale Mill. To keep to the river I had to follow a sheep track, sometimes crawling on my hands and knees, but it was worth it because eventually I did find "day-old" spraint.

I had my confirmation. This was not a case of two separate otters, but of one. Starting the night near Porlock Marsh, it had travelled across it, up Hawkcombe Water, then up and over the watershed to drop down into Horner Water just below Nutscale reservoir, where it spent the next night. Mystery solved!

LITERATURE, ETC

At some stage in the early autumn, two important publications will be brought out. The Environment Agency is due to publish the results of last year's 5th national otter survey. The numbers are considerably up on the last survey of 2000, and the spread of the otter population has been dramatic. I am afraid that this will provoke an hysterical over-reaction from some of the coarse fishing fraternity.

Much more interesting and readable will be the Somerset Otter Group's Book of Research Papers, to which several of you have contributed--well, you all have, through provision of the data on which the papers are based, but some have written them up. We will be selling this at £10, to cover the printing costs, and to keep a bit coming into our funds.

In it we are making some quite advanced claims about population monitoring and assessment, which go beyond the scope of the national survey, which only looks at geographical spread, and measures those parts of the country with or without otters. We attempt to go beyond this, and to assess the numerical strength of the animals present. This may cause controversy, but as we show the basis on which we make this claim, we may be scoring another first with this publication.