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## SOMERSERT WILDLIFE TRUST

### OTTER GROUP NEWSLETTER No 1

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That we need a Newsletter reflects the success of the response to our appeal for new members to increase our coverage of the whole County. Welcome to the first edition. With over 40 active surveyors (or pairs of surveyors), we should be in a good position to monitor any trends in the otter population of Somerset very quickly.

The indefatigable Cle is producing a list of members, and of who goes where, so that you will be able to coordinate with each other within your own catchments, and discuss progress etc. It is hoped that this will be popular and a help. Plodding along the river bank in one's wellies, one frequently gets the feeling that one is the only Person, let alone Otter Botherer, left on the planet. But not any more; thanks to Cle's lists you can ring each other up and boast about what you have found. It won't be long before we are giving running commentaries over our mobile phones, perhaps!

#### FEBRUARY MEETING

About 30 members made it to Fyne Court for the February Get-together. Cle's minutes will reveal all, no doubt. Many useful points were raised; count spraints, please; and keep your eyes skinned for Water Voles, now rarer than Otters. Heavy emphasis was laid on the importance of getting your returns in quickly to the Secretary once you have done your April check. Do it before your Income Tax return: Income Tax is now self-assessment, but the Otters have to rely on you to do their return for them.

As Liz Biron explained to us at the Autumn meeting, our records are very useful to SERC (Somerset Environmental Records Centre) in decisions about developments and "improvements" to water courses. They cannot look after the Otters' habitat unless the information is properly up to date, so please post your findings off promptly.

The date of the May 2-Day Event was fixed for May 10/11th. Please be sure to let us know if you are to be away, so that we can arrange some degree of cover. With our increased membership we have a good chance this year of a very accurate census.

The October meeting will be at Fyne Court on 6th October. By then members have usually had several uninterrupted months of surveying, and can give a good feel of the pattern of usage in their area, rather more certainly than in February, when the vagaries of the weather may have influenced things rather more.

The February meeting wondered whether the drought had affected things this winter. Certainly there was some disquiet expressed by people checking in the East, and even in the Centre of the county, that the pattern of Otter usage was more patchy than it had been; Surveyors from the Exmoor end were markedly more confident, it seemed, than those further East. We will all meet again in May. And let's hope that by then we will be able to tell whether this was just an effect of the unduly dry winter, or something perhaps more worrying.

## OTTERS ON FILM

Peter Hurman of Fitzhead gave us a most stimulating showing of some of his Wildlife films to conclude the February meeting. Dramatic shots of rutting stags, roaring and fighting, and getting at times very menacingly close to Peter's chosen bush, were followed by some very interesting shots of otters in Shetland going about their business on the shores and among the boulders.

It was fascinating to be so well reminded of these two magnificent species, both of which are still to be found in over-populated and developed Somerset.

## DEAD OTTERS

12 are known to have been killed in 1996 in Somerset. Most of these died on the roads. So far this year (early March) I have heard of only two, both just over the border in Devon. But it is probable that there are more such deaths than the still tentative level of population can really sustain.

The figures for the whole of the South-west are really horrifying; on the roads alone 20 in 1990, 14 in 91, then 13, 15, 20, 27 in subsequent years; at present there has been quite a spate of corpses from Cornwall, so much so that they are queuing in the deep freezes to go for autopsy.

But at least they are being examined, and the first report on the Vet's findings is due for publication soon. The early indications are that there is no evidence of disease, or of pollution-caused damage. A larger proportion of Dog Otters than one would expect are run over, and many of them have been injured beforehand in serious fighting.

Roads are not the only cause of deaths, of course. Any dead otter should be brought to the notice of the Environment Agency, which is the Lead Agency with primary responsibility under the European Biodiversity arrangements for this Endangered Species.

They have an excellent system in place now, and unlike what used to happen (or not happen), all dead otters will be examined in time to take action on any findings.

## THROUGH THE LACE CURTAINS OR WHAT THE NEIGHBOURS ARE UP TO.

CORNWALL. The "far west" has recently established its Otter Group, and publishes a most professional looking Newsletter, with pics.

They do not have sufficient members yet to cover all their many small rivers, but under the expert guidance of Hilary Marshall, who did so much valuable work on the Somerset Levels back along, they are locating the areas with and without Otters.

## PROGRESS AT DUNSTER

Dunster is where it is all at, just now. The Dunster Marshes are being examined with a view to the possible rehabilitation of some of the habitat. And the notorious Loxhole Bridge, where 3 otters have been killed on the roads in the few years since they returned to the river Avill, is to be made safer .

This is being undertaken by a team from the Conservation section of the Wessex branch of the Environment Agency, piloted by Maree Whyte. The height of the embankment and the design of the flood relief channel have made this a difficult problem to crack, but by a combination of prohibitive fencing, and spraint spreading to familiarise the Otters with the preferred new route, it is hoped they will soon learn to appreciate what Maree has designed for them

This is not the only improvement of its kind, Ann Skinner, Head of the Wessex EA Conservation Section, tells me. Other black spots are to be given some improvements under the budget for preventing road casualties, including probably the bend at East Lyng, just by the Rose & Crown Pub where we meet for the 2-Day event. We select it as the central point of Somerset, as near as may be. How symbolic of our hopes for our major wild animal if a major step towards their safety and conservation can be seen to take place bang on the county bullseye.

## NATIONAL MAMMAL MONITORING SCHEMES

Our method of proceeding has recently been enquired after by scientists from the Wildlife Conservation Research Unit of the University of Oxford, as part of an enquiry for the Dept of the Environment into how best to monitor British Mammals. Birds are comparatively easy, and have been well monitored for years. Mammals, especially underwater, nomadic, nocturnal ones are much more tricky.

Our scheme is different from the National Survey method, and has different aims. As you realise, what we do is to ask each observer to nominate a set of check points, and then to spotcheck them regularly over a long period of time. By not varying the points, and by resisting the temptation to follow the otters around, we build up a measure of any trends over the passing of time. But we cannot quantitatively compare one river with another, as the amount of input may be very varied.

By contrast, the National Survey method was designed to check whether otters were present or absent. To do this, an observer searches 600 metres of one bank(just under half a mile), starting for convenience at a bridge or access point. If there has been an Otter on that river recently, you are highly likely to find some sign. The next check point is then selected about 5 to 8 kms away.

This has now been used for 3 national surveys. As the observers are careful to check the same stretches each time, one survey can be compared with the next seven years later. And because the method is exactly the same wherever they go, they can compare one river with another.

DEVON. Our immediate neighbours(?the mid-west?) have two problems to get around: being a vast county with major river systems, and having lots of Otters. This year has seen the launch of a major initiative masterminded by Mary-Rose Lane of the Devon Wildlife Trust, to try to check on them all. She is rightly worried that despite a strong population there seem to be areas where the otters are not establishing themselves. Devon's chosen method is to follow the National Survey's standard system, so that their findings will be directly comparable. DWT hosted an inter-county discussion of Otter groups recently, and much fruitful note-taking and discussion took place.

CUBA. To our North, the C\_ounty which U\_sed to B\_e A\_von has the opposite set of problems: not as much habitat, and far fewer otters. There has been a recent initiative of the North Somerset Otters and Moors Project, with funding help from the Environment Agency, to conduct a thorough check of all their river systems, some of which ajoin our waters. We are helping with this as and when, and Tim McGrath, the project leader, is coming to our 2-Day Event.

DORSET (?the Far East?) Another under-ottered county, but they have recently advertised for an otter and water vole conservationist. Some of their rivers have had Otters released onto them by the Otter Trust. They wish to monitor these, and to look for signs of expansion from Somerset further towards the East.

#### FREE ALCOHOL AT 2-DAY EVENT

This year's 2-Day event will be enlivened by a most unusual freebie. There may be no such thing as a free lunch, as they say, but Karen Coxon will be bringing along free alcohol for all.

She is starting a Ph D course of study on Otter populations, and will be developing and utilising the very modern and state of the art technique of identifying otters from the DNA in their spraints. To this end she hopes to be able to use some of the spraints you find. The big snag is that the spraints have to be dead fresh when they are dropped into the little pot of alcohol in which they will travel to Aberdeen University. So when she heard of a convocation of some 40 people, all of whom would be able to be oath positive that their spraints were fresh from the previous night, she leapt at the chance. She will be bringing along lots of little travelling pots of alcohol, in the hope that you will be able to supply her with the fresh spraints to complete the cocktail.

Her course will last 4 years; from her results we may be able to tell the ratio of males to females, and even which Otters have taken part in all 4 annual events. Perhaps they too will be awarded a box of chocolates as a prize for energetic contribution to the Otter Group.

1995 RESULTS Last year we located otters on the Avill, Exe, Tone(3), Isle, Paret, Yeo, Cannington Brk., Brue and North Drain. We were diddled by otters we expected to find on the Aller, Barle, Washford, Back Stream, Ding, Kling's Sedgemoor Drain, Axe(S.coast) and Mells. So we claimed 16, possibly 18 centres of known activity.

What will 11th May reveal this year?

#### NEXT YEAR'S NATIONAL SURVEY

The next National Survey is due to start in Autumn 1998, 7 years after the one whose results were published last spring(1996). For economy reasons they proceed on a Chess-board pattern, and survey only the black squares. Our important area, where the frontier of otter expansion has rested for some years, is unfortunately in a white square, so is never checked.

#### NEW VENTURE FOR SOG

We are therefore hoping that some of you may like to try to use the National Survey Method, as well as your regular spot checks. Instruction sheets will be sent out. Then we will be able to compare the two methods, to fill in the gap in the next National Survey, and to add to the information gathered by the Devon surveys on those rivers we share with them. A good return for a half-mile walk.

#### SOMERSET'S WONDERFUL WILDLIFE. SWT'S BIG SUMMER EXHIBITION

Our specialist group, like all the others, is invited to participate in this ambitious venture. Trish Ashley has already got some lively ideas for our display at the Fyne Court Exhibition in August. She would welcome further suggestions and offers of help. Don't be shy.

#### WATCH YOUR RIVERS :

Keep an eye out for things which could harm the water environment on your patch. 0800 807060 is the Environment Agency's pollution emergency number. Use it quickly if you suspect things are going wrong. They have a very rapid response time, and can limit the amount of damage caused. Recently the Tone has had two major incidents. Vandals released Cider concentrate in vast quantities into the Halse water at Norton Fitzwarren, but luckily the fish kill was confined to an area of the Canal near Bridgwater. A few days later a considerable amount of diesel found its way into the same part of the Tone, but the height of the water was sufficient to prevent major damage.

Engineering and improvements can be a potential hazard too. For example, the flood defence scheme at Hillfarance may well interfere with some otter holts. Early warning can lead to discussion, and often prevention of such hazards. Ring SERC

#### DATES FOR THE DIARY

- 15 March Devon survey 1; National Survey method
- 10/11 May SOG 2-DAY EVENT; co-ordinated survey of whole county.
- Meet for pub lunch at Rose & Crown, East Lyng(ST332288).
- 14 June Devon Survey 2
- August Somerset's Wonderful Wildlife. SWT exhibition and events at Fyne Court.
- 13 September Devon Survey 3
- 6 October SOG AUTUMN MEETING 7.30 Fyne Court. Talk on Eels and other Otter Food fishes.