

Draft

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SOMERSET WILDLIFE TRUST OTTER GROUP

NEWSLOTTER N02

July 1997

Welcome to our second Newsletter. And congratulations to all of us for the amazing success of the third Two-day Event in May. A full summary of the findings follows, but one really needs a map (which the technology is not up to doing) to show how widespread our coverage was, and what a complete picture we got of the Otter activity across Somerset. As far as I know we are the only County to manage this feat; and of course we are the most apposite county to try to keep such a close eye on our Otters, because the frontier of their recovery has been for several years stuck in Somerset.

Although other counties are starting to make hopeful noises about the spread of otters, our survey shows that otters are still not strong on the Levels, or to their East and North, so it will be important for us to keep a careful eye on things for a year or two yet.

BIRTHS AND DEATHS

So far so good. Only two deaths in Somerset to date (mid July), in March on the Parrett, and in May, the day after the Two-day Event, on the Brue. It will be interesting to see if Karen Coxon's DNA analysis will tell us which of the otters we recorded it was. To balance these, cubs have been reported from the Tone, the Brue and the South coast ~~Axe~~.

SPRAINT COUNTING

Please could you try always to give a number on your report forms, not just a tick. Now that Somerset has a proper population of otters again, it no longer serves just to say yes or no for otter activity on a river. There are of course colossal limitations to spraint counting and the degree of conclusion one can draw from it, but at least one can distinguish between regular activity and a casual passer-by, so it is well worth trying to get a count. After all, the limitations will remain constant over the years, so we should be able to detect trends of more or fewer, if not accurate measurements of how many.

ALIEN INVADERS

It is the season for crop cycles, UFOs and beings from the beyond, so be vigilant, especially on Exmoor. Escapees from the Dinosaur park are reported to be on the loose, but don't worry, they won't crush your car; that will just be the normal handbag thieving team. Look out for small, rather dumpy otters with chubby, short faces; Asian short clawed Otters in fact (*Amblonyx cinerea*). A male and female got out, and should be able to survive in the wild; a small colony lived/lives on the Thames.

SAFETY FIRST, AND SECOND

Not long ago a photographer who fell off the famous Cobb (pier) sued the Lyme Regis Town council. Apparently they were at fault for not posting notices that wet rocks and sea weed are slippery, and that the Law of Gravity operated in their area -like the handbag thieves.

SO BE YE WELL AWARE that rivers are tricky places, and that even so common a mishap as a twisted ankle can be very bad for your health under water. Fyne Court has confirmed that volunteers are covered on their insurance, which ought to be sufficient warning that rivers are risky, and that it would be better if you were with someone else for the rough bits.

"SOMERSET'S WONDERFUL WILDLIFE"
SWT's BIG SUMMER EXHIBITION

Margaret Palmer and Rosemary Russ have taken over our display for this from Trish Ashley, who is very busy with a new contract. Ring Margaret on 01823 337570 to offer ideas and assistance. The exhibition will run for most of August, so please try to visit it and support our stand.

STONE IN TROUBLE

The poor old Stone has suffered again. As a result of a massive thunderstorm, which delivered several inches of rain in just a few hours, vast quantities of the fine red soil from around Bishops Lydeard were washed into the river as silt. The brew was so thick, and the particles so fine, that fish were suffocated by a combination of clogged gills and low oxygen. Several hundred fish were killed over more than a mile of the Stone on Curry Moor.

Recently there have been signs of two otters on Curry Moor, one a normal medium-large one, to judge from the padding, and the other some sort of sumo wrestler, a giant with vast feet which sink deep into the mud under the weight of his wellbeing, a set of the most impressive impressions I have ever seen. Presumably he will now be going on a much needed diet, or possibly moving out.

Although the incident was localised in effect, and not terminal, one wonders how much more punishment the Stone can take: in the last newsletter we reported two pollutions just above Taunton, while the report on the Two-day Event refers to the damage done by two others last year. Just before that the Trull stream was wiped out by a major farm poisoning, and the West Buckland stream is still struggling after the Motorway services killed all the fish two summers ago.

All these things must add up, and reduce the otters' chances.

So be vigilant, and hit the phone at the first signs of pollution. 0800 807060 is the Environment Agency's hot line, and produces a very rapid and effective response.

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ROAD BLACK SPOTS

Work is now completed at Loxhole Bridge, and it would take a very acrobatic otter to get onto the main road now. That is unless the local bolshie Badgers succeed in vandalising the fencing again; they made strenuous efforts at first, but Maree Whyte of the Environment agency has been countering their every move. Well done Maree to get these works finished before the holiday traffic season. It is hoped that the bolshie badgers will soon find their way along the underpass, and that their path will make the solution obvious to the next otter to come along.

Maree and co are now looking at the black spots on the Levels, especially the one below East Lyng. The Environment Agency is the lead organisation for Otters under the recent Biodiversity initiative.

DATES FOR THE DIARY

9 August onwards "Somerset's Wonderful Wildlife"; exhibition at Fyne Court.

13 September Devon survey 3.

6 October Our group's Autumn meeting 7.30 at Fyne Court talk by Dr Francis Farr-Cox of the Environment Agency's fisheries staff on the interesting lives of What Otters Eat.

Followed by slides of 2 Day Event Report

SOG file.

SOMERSET WILDLIFE TRUST
OTTER GROUP: TWO DAY EVENT
10TH/11TH MAY 1997

This year we had very nearly complete coverage of the rivers of Somerset, with over 50 people taking part. Interestingly, we did not increase our score of Otters definitely located by a huge amount, although the very low water levels undoubtedly enabled quite a few otters to avoid the overnight count. When due allowance is made for these, our total putative census shows a pleasing increase. Perhaps this is partly because the lack of spates last winter meant a reduction in road casualties .

1 OTTER ACTIVITY RECORDED ON NIGHT OF 10/11MAY:

1997:18; 1996:11; 1995:9.

Barle- Sherdon
Barle/Exe- Marsh/Exebridge
Exe- Winsford
Quarme- Luckwell
Aller- Horner/Hawkcombe
Culm- Headwaters
Tone- Stoford/Bradford
Tone- Wellington
Tone- Creech St Michael
Axe(S.Coast)- Winsham/Clapton
Isle- Dillington
Parrett- Severalls
Yeo- Yeovil
Yeo/Cam- Bridgehampton
Sowey- Othery
S. Drain- Catcott
N. Drain- Sand drove
Alham/Brue- Arthur's br/Lydford

2 OTTERS MISSED ON THE DAY:

7, or possibly 8 other otters were almost certainly somewhere in our area, but did not oblige with fresh evidence in a convenient place.

Washford
Donniford
Bathern
Avill
Cannington
Tone 2/?3

3 BOUNDARY HOPPERS

Three rivers had recent evidence of otter activity, but the occupants were probably just over the county boundary, in Devon or Dorset.

R. Otter
Yarty
Yeo

4 SUMMARY:

Assuming each site contains only one animal, we located 18 definites, 7 probables, and 4 possibles, a total of 25 at least, with a chance of 29.

Last year we had 16(possibly 18), and in our first survey in 1995 we claimed 15.

For the first time this year we confirmed a blank stretch of water. The Halse water, which was polluted by farm chemicals in two places last year, appears not to be used by otters at all this spring, which is pulling down the amount of activity on the adjoining Back Stream, where otters bred in recent years.

This shows how dependent these rare and scattered animals are on a healthy river environment.

In this context the low number again from the Somerset Levels is very worrying, although we found a few more than last year.