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**SOMERSET OTTER GROUP  
NEWSLOTTER 11  
January 2002**

**AUTUMN MEETING: 15 October 2001**

It was great pleasure and a relief to be able to get back to normal again, with a well attended meeting at the Victory Inn. Among all the buzz and friendly chatter it seemed that most people were back surveying on at least part of their patches. Saranne had produced excellent maps showing our recent results, and, by default, revealing the major gaps in the coverage. James asked that people keep in touch with their neighbours and adjust things to give as full a cover as is possible. As there was a pleasing turn-out of new members many of the vacancies may have been filled. It was especially encouraging to see a big group from the Yeovil end of the county.

A quick business meeting covered some familiar points. The post-mortem programme is continuing, but we are still to freeze the dead otters, although this puts a limit on some of the investigations that can be done. The Environment Agency is still co-ordinating this scheme. Sadly the DNA programme has proved too expensive and too complicated to be sensible, so that is on indefinite hold. However the analysis of all our past records is going ahead well; Karen Coxon is in the cockpit for this one. James had put together a series of records for the Brue Valley, which seemed to show that the otters are not up to what one would expect in this important area. It must be a priority for the Otter Group to continue the strong series of records for this catchment, so what and how will be a major item for the spring meeting. Obviously there has been an unavoidable break in the records with first the extended floods and then the restrictions of foot and mouth, so we must get onto the Brue as soon as possible this year. Finally some river walks for training and revision were arranged; feedback from these, and the possibility of some more, at the next meeting.

Then the fun part of the evening, an excellent supper, and the videos and slides. Peter Hurman and Peter Seeley had set up the equipment, and provided some really exciting footage, some of otters in Shetland, and some of a Tone otter hunting a pond in bright sunlight, and finally and dramatically catching a large Carp. This was followed by an equally exciting show from Charlie Hamilton-James, with some stunning slides of wild otters in Scotland, and some recently shot video of a family of otters from near here. The climax of the show was the clip of the mortal combat of two female Kingfishers being terminated by the abrupt intrusion of a Mink which killed one of them. An evening to remember.

We are very grateful to the two Peters, who went to a lot of trouble on a day that was pretty inconvenient for both of them. And especial thanks to Charlie, who had to dash down from London, having only just returned to this country from filming abroad, and then had to go straight back again.

**SPRING MEETING**

We are extremely fortunate to have a brilliant and very important talk for our next meeting on **Monday, 4<sup>th</sup> March**. Vic Simpson, the veterinary pathologist who handles all our dead otters, has agreed to come up from Truro to explain what he has found. It will be a fascinating talk, and some of the problems he has uncovered are of major importance, and significant beyond mere wildlife conservation. Not only is he an accomplished speaker, but those of you who saw the BBC Wildlife Awards Evening on the telly will remember that he was the first winner of the Wildlife Vet of the year. This deserved accolade is made even more remarkable when you consider that he deals with dead animals only, which is not nearly so charismatic and tellygenic as some of the work that Rolf Harris regularly features. Full marks to the Beeb for recognising the real relevance of what Vic has achieved. We are very lucky that so busy a man has found the time to talk to us. Spare no effort to get to the **Victory Inn** for 7.30 on **Monday 4<sup>th</sup> March**. Bring your friends, and send your little form to Saranne.

## PATTERNS OF BEHAVIOUR

A thing that so large a group as ours might be able to research and throw some light on, is the possibility of otters having a regularity or a seasonality in their patterns of behaviour. I do not think that Karen's analysis of all our data will cover this; to an extent so large a group will cancel out any seasonal effects, in that if an otter seasonally moves to the coast from the river, say, one surveyor will gain while another loses. But either of them might notice that this always happens at a certain time, or under certain conditions. For instance Jill and Alastair Parker believe that Otters leave the Alham in the summer months, and that the summer penning levels of the managed streams near Langport similarly affect the otters there. James Williams has a theory that otters leave major main rivers like the Exe and the Taw at times of very low flow.

Or, on a more frequent scale, do you detect a regularity in the way the otters patrol your patch? Charlie Hamilton-James definitely said that the otters passing the mill where he lives had a predictable frequency, predictable enough to base a filming schedule on. I hope there is some form of log or written record of this. And a changing pattern has been commented on by somebody living on the Donniford Brook. However, James's daily checks of his Otter Loo seem to reveal no sort of a pattern; the noticeable thing there is that otters turn up quite frequently, although not regularly, until suddenly there will be a long gap of several weeks. Does this mean that "his" otter has gone to somebody else for a bit, or is it dead and the territory vacant for a while, or is the otter a bitch who is pre-occupied elsewhere by having her cubs?

Could you all look at your records and gather your thoughts about this for the spring meeting? Dr Paul Chanin of Exeter has expressed a keen interest in this, and particularly in those of the group who are keeping a daily record. These provide a valuable chance to find out quite a lot about what is happening on the rivers, and if enough are doing it, to estimate a base line of population against which any increase or decrease may perhaps be measurable.

Charlie Hamilton-James has phoned since the meeting with further news of his otter family. He watched and filmed the whole group fishing together on several nights, father included. As the cubs were nearly as big as the adults, and as one of them is a dog otter, this was rather surprising. From all the evidence of fighting we have found in the postmortems, such peaceful collaboration seems unexpected. It all goes to show what a lot we still have to learn about these mysterious creatures.

With a large group like ours, we can surely compile some evidence on some of these little enigmas. From her analysis of our records Karen Coxon should be able to suggest ways of expanding or improving what we record. I know already that she is emphatically insistent on the subject of putting down negative records on your forms. This is vital for establishing any trends.

But other areas we could well start looking at are :

- Otters away from water
- Crossing places from one catchment to another.
- Fidelity to spraint sites/ abandoning them for new ones nearby.
- Territory/aggression/ social chumminess.
- Otters and Mink
- Mink themselves, presence/absence.
- Otters in towns
- Otters in daytime, especially if they are feeding
- Seasonal or daily rhythms
- Exploitation of seasonally available foods

If there is a good snowfall we could find out a lot about some of these. Tracking can be such exciting fun.

## BIRTHS AND DEATHS

There were 22 confirmed corpses in the year 2001. Worst hit river was the Avill, with at least 4, on top of 3 the previous year. This must be more otters than so small a catchment could sustain all at once, so the assumption has to be that there is a source of steady recruitment, probably from the Exe, via the Quarme. The Parrett and the Tone also had four each, with rumours of two more on the Tone, but they are much larger systems, so will not be so hard hit. But there were two more Tone otters found together not far from James Williams' house on New Year's Day, both bitches, a 13lb mother and 8lb cub. This makes four otters picked up in that parish in eleven months, three of them bitches.

The hardest part is when people tell one to look on the bright side, the fact that so many otters are getting wasted shows that there must be plenty to squash. I doubt if the Dixons on the Avill will agree with this.

The restricted access to the river banks last year has meant that there have been fewer sightings of cubs than usual, but breeding definitely took place on the Quarme, the Exe, the Parrett, the Tone and the Taw, so presumably there is no major impediment from pollutants in the environment as a whole. Which is just as well, in view of the number of deaths; it must take at least ten litters of cubs to replace the known losses. And what proportion of the deaths do we get to hear about? Only violent and sudden deaths, and presumably not all of those.

## NATIONAL OTTER SURVEY

This survey was finally finished, a year later than planned, in the autumn. The method is for a trained surveyor to check a scattering of pre-selected 600 metre stretches of river for any signs of otters, and to record them positive or negative. The whole of England is divided into a chequerboard of 50 km squares, and only the black ones get looked at. James Williams was responsible for all the sites in Somerset, in two areas, to the West of Dunster, and to the east of Glastonbury. The bit in between is a "white" square. There have been three previous national surveys, at seven or eight year intervals. The first found evidence at only 5% of the sites, the second at 11%, and the third at 22% of them, that is at 706 of the 3188 sites looked at. 2482 sites, therefore, had not a vestige of a sign of an otter as recently as 1994.

The initial impression as the results come in is that the survey will show another good increase, but even if the score doubles again it will still be that over half of England had no Otters at the turn of the century. So our survey work is still very important, especially if one looks at the pattern of the Somerset records. The Exmoor end was strong, but the eastern end was less than half as good, and its figures were boosted by a very strong result from the Parrett. In the far east of Somerset there is still a very weak population of otters. It seems that the rate of expansion of the nineties has slowed right down. It will be interesting reading when the results are finally published in July.

Meanwhile James has set himself the task of surveying our important "white" square, to provide a baseline of data for future comparison. This is not such a mammoth undertaking as it at first might seem, as many of your records for this winter will be able to be used to cover the bulk of it: only a few gaps, and awkward corners across the county boundary in Devon or Dorset, need to be done especially. He hopes to get this ready for use as a comparison for the Two-day Event on 25/26 May.

## MINK

These interesting immigrants seem still to be in a major decline. As they are so closely related to otters, and share the same habitat, this could be a sinister and significant development. We ought to keep careful records of Mink as well as otters, and send them in to Saranne for centralisation with your annual scores. Remember, these are due after your April check, and should include negative findings, as distinct from visits not made. **Please be prompt.**

## TWO-DAY EVENT

It is proposed to hold this on the weekend of **25/26<sup>th</sup> May**. This is slightly later than we have had it before, so this will be an item for discussion at the March meeting.

## REPORT ON THE RECENT TRAINING DAYS

**River Tone:** From Janet and John Dixon

The 25<sup>th</sup> of November was a grey drizzly Sunday with a bite in the wind when a small group of intrepid lutroptomists gathered at Bradford-on-Tone Bridge to await the arrival of their game leader.

Game from recent hospitalisation but dependably game for the task, as always, James punctually appeared and quickly enthralled his audience with tales of the riverbank.

No matter how much one has read or seen already, time spent with James is always illuminating and his enthusiasm, founded on his wealth of experience, is infectious. In a flash a group of highly respectable local citizens was groveling in the mud and splashing in the water like ten year olds; to the extent that a couple of genuine ten year olds were deflected from building a highly exciting looking bridge into observing the antics of these strange adults on the opposite bank.

Much was seen and much was learned, the pub did a roaring trade at lunch time and a small band of muddy but more committed Otter Group members returned to their own patch of water wetter but wiser. I wonder what the otters made of these antics!

**Yeovil area:** from Rebecca Stevens

On Sunday 9<sup>th</sup> December volunteers from the Yeovil area met with James to learn the art of otter surveying. We met at Bradford Abbas Bridge on a fine but cold morning. There was a good turnout of eager volunteers and we set off along the riverbank. We found fresh spraint on a tuft of grass; this was passed around and keenly sniffed, to compare to jasmine tea. At one point James pointed out a fallen tree on the opposite side of the bank as a possible spot, intrepid volunteers clambered out to investigate and there was the spraint. James made the otter surveying look easy.

We then drove to a nearby spot to look for otter tracks under a bridge. Those of us with wellies were able to wade through mud and were rewarded with perfect mink tracks, but no otter tracks, useful for future reference though. We adjourned to a local pub to look at all the spots that need surveying locally. Most of these patches were snapped up quickly, but there are still a couple of sites that need regular volunteers assigned to them. Hopefully the rain will hold off for long enough for the floods to subside and we'll be able to look for our otters; if we have as much success as we did on our training day we'll be very happy.

### Footnote from Saranne:

Another reminder that I would like to have your year's results as soon as possible after your April Survey. I will send out one copy of the results sheet for next year with this – please make copies. **One sheet** should be completed for each **site** surveyed. If you survey both banks of a stream around one bridge, I treat it as one site for my records. If you remember Karen tried to define a site in a previous Newsletter. We agreed that a "site" was all spraint locations within about 50m of the bridge or other feature defining the site. Use notes to highlight new spraint locations where applicable. Of course, there may be exceptional circumstances – in which case please use common sense.

Also please note that it would be helpful if you could put the **day** (date) of the survey in – this is for SERC's records, and if no survey was done during any month, make this clear (e.g. N/S)