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**SOMERSET WILDLIFE TRUST
THE OTTER GROUP**

**NEWSLOTTER 9
JANUARY 2001**

AUTUMN MEETING

Many thanks to Steve Powell and the RSPCA for providing us with their conference room for the October meeting. It was both comfortable and convenient. The main focus of the meeting was to look at the county again in a synchronous survey, to see if a change of season produced any major change in pattern. Inevitably there were a few gaps, but thanks and congratulations to the group for a meaningful and successful exercise. The main limitation was that high rivers on the Levels gave an excuse for there again being a poor level of discernible otter activity north of the Poldens. But at least we managed to survey; since then the whole place has been in a more or less continuous state of inundation, so we were lucky.

The pattern seemed to be very similar to the one that has established itself in our May 2 day events: plentiful otters to the West, but a scarcity East of Bridgwater still. We claimed 28 otters, or, more correctly, distinct areas where otters were active. We had a significant survey gap on the Tone, so could assume more there, and on the Donniford, Huntspill, Axe(S), and Brue, so the putative total should be between 30 and 35, the same as in previous checks.

Perhaps the most encouraging finding was plenty of activity around the Yeovil area; hope we can follow this up. Since the survey there have been reports and corpses from the north slope of the Quantocks, another area of expansion.

GROUP NEWS

There has been an encouraging amount of new interest, especially in the Yeovil area, partly as a result of a talk James gave there in the autumn; we hope to meet Nikki Jenkins, Brian Kenny, Valerie Corner and Becky Stephens at one of our next meetings. Mrs K Paisey of Clevedon wants to help up in that area, which will cover the bits Eleanor Gardner used to help with, and we hope Mrs James will take over from Carolyn Gore, who has moved. Another change is that Jill and Alastair Parker are to become more loosely associated, still keeping in touch and helping with the big ones, but taking a well-earned rest from the regular monthly slog. They got the top right-hand corner going, and started the ball rolling which has recently developed into the wonderful scheme coordinated by Simon Reece of Clifton College to take a unified look at the whole of the Bristol Avon catchment. This river crosses so many county and district boundaries that it was suffering from piecemeal neglect; but not any longer. And just in time. The preliminary findings seem to be of a sparse and scattered population of otters; it will be wonderful if the scheme has got going just in time to chart the progress of the recolonisation of an extensive and strategic river system to a full population.

NATIONAL SURVEY.

The survey started in early 2000, and the intention was to repeat the pattern of the previous three national surveys at the same time of year. The wet Autumn has set this back a bit, but Andrew Crawford, the coordinator, is confident that the report will nevertheless come out more or less to time in mid-summer, although several areas will have been done late because of the flooding. As far as Somerset is concerned, the western block was done on time in the spring, and showed a strong result, as we would have expected from the Group's surveys. The eastern end is still to be completed, so no news from there yet. The "white" square in the middle, roughly from Dunster to Glastonbury, does not qualify for inclusion, but it is my intention to use your records to give it a score by roughly the same method. This should enable us to have a comparison, and, with a little judicious infilling, enable us to define the otter frontier pretty exactly. The counties further east are showing increased scores over last time, but their percentages are still well below that of the Exmoor end. It all proves yet again that Somerset is strategically balanced on the frontier of strong otter rivers, and goes to show how important our work of continuous monitoring is.

KAREN DENIES EVERYTHING?

The national media went into a minor feeding frenzy in the early autumn, and carried a series of lurid articles that the otters were losing their sanity, and starting to become cannibals as well. The alleged basis for this was a paper written by Karen and Vie Simpson, the Veterinary Pathologist who does all our post-mortems. Karen insists that the science does not bear this interpretation at all, and that the accusations of Mad Otter Disease are the result of a series of short circuits in the journalistic communal mind. There will be a chance to quiz her on this when she is our guest speaker at the February meeting: "Are the otters madder than those who run round the rivers after them?" will be my starter for ten.

MINK

Except in Hampshire and the New Forest, where criminal nutters released tens of thousands to devastate the nesting birds, mink seem in very short supply at present. Grab any carcasses you can; they are wanted for two reasons, one to test for TB, and the other to check for diseases which could also spread to otters, notably Aleutians disease. We ought also to record their evidence when we find it. Although they are an imported pest, it is worrying that they have crashed so drastically so quickly, more than 70% in a very few years. That is exactly what happened to the otters back along. So scoop up your mink, and be vigilant of your otters.

ROAD DEATHS

The millennium year was a disaster for otter mortality. Previously we were worried by 15 Or 17 deaths in a year. Last year I recorded 31. A few were in the east of Devon, and one or two were unconfirmed, but all the same it must

mean that we are squashing the otters about as fast as they can breed the cubs. The post-mortems are proving very revealing; there are several significant areas of weakness in the otter's health turning up under the microscopes, mainly, it is tentatively thought, a result of a vitamin A deprivation associated with certain pollutants. Further research is vital, so keep collecting the corpses. For the next few months they will have all to be frozen, so it doesn't matter for the time being if you freeze them. This reduces the amount of information that can be gleaned, but will be a temporary necessity until the new arrangements are organised.

Worst hit river must go to the little Avill, at Dunster, which has lost four in ten months. The other deaths have been more evenly scattered, although the southern Axe can ill afford to have lost another couple on top of the eight last winter.

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS

"Why don't you come to my farm tomorrow afternoon, and see the otter in my pond?" I was asked. So I said yes, and turned up the next day towards sunset. The farmer and Peter Seely, the video expert were coming away from the pondside across the farmyard, empty tea things in their hands.

"Too late, it's all over. It has been swimming about all afternoon in the bright sunlight, and I'm nearly out of tape. Best come in the house and watch it on the telly." But I wanted to see the real thing, not a tape, so I sulkily declined, and said I would keep vigil by the wall at the end of the yard, despite the fact that it had been and gone.

The light had not really started to fade when the smug two came out again to join me. Shortly afterwards a moorhen shot noisily out of a small bramble bush and skittered across the muddy water. Then the otter emerged, and set about searching the pond. She was well aware that there were three torsos propped on their elbows on the waterside wall, in full view; she looked directly at us several times from close to, and the light was in her favour. She swam about openly for many minutes, pausing only to crunch a few small fish, before resuming her underwater search of the muddy pond bottom. She had stirred up too much mud for us to be able to see her, but we could follow her by the bulge on the top of the shallow water as she quartered about.

Suddenly she accelerated tremendously, and the bulge hurtled and twisted across the middle of the pond for a surprising time. When she came up she had a considerable carp clamped in her jaws, at least 6 lbs in weight. It was too wide in the body, so she held it firmly by the face, something I had often heard of but never had a chance to verify. The farmer was highly delighted to see such a thing in his own pond, and Peter got it all on the Video.

DNA RESEARCH

The new lab started processing the backlog just before Christmas, after much patient thought, which seems to have ironed out at least some of the wrinkles. The success rate on samples which provide useable DNA is well up, but we do not know yet what proportion will be sufficiently clear to allow for typing - that is to give a positive identification. Unfortunately the geologically slow decision making processes of the EA have meant that we were late starting, and it now looks unlikely that the full picture will be available when Karen addresses us at the February meeting

OTTERS

Steve Ridgway, Greenham.

I have seen otters many times now over the last few years, mostly on Westford Water near Wellington, where I lived before moving to Greenham on the river Tone. Some people may say I am lucky having so many close quarter encounters with otters but when you live next to their environment and spend so much spare time as I do by the river, it is inevitable that our paths sometimes cross. I now find it impossible to venture anywhere near water without looking for signs of otters but I can be sure I am not alone in that respect.

Since August 1997 I have seen at least seven different animals on the Tone and its tributaries although I am sure there have probably been more. The only times that I can be sure of seeing specific otters, have been a bitch and two cubs at Westford, a bitch and three cubs on the Tone and a very large dog that was an infrequent visitor to Westford Water.

The first encounter was late one August evening when taking my terriers for their last walk of the day by torchlight along the stream. Nothing could prepare me for what happened and the obsession that what was to follow. The dogs began barking excitedly on the edge of the stream and shining the torch upstream, I caught a glimpse of my first wild otter! It swam quickly just below the surface, before going under one of the arches of the stone bridge at Westford. Heart pounding I leant over the side of the bridge and shone the torch underneath only to be hissed at angrily. At this point I knew I had seen enough and let the otter carry on unhindered. It was one of the truly magical moments of my life so far and began not just my education in otters but perhaps more importantly, a greater understanding of the environment they inhabit, something that has also paid dividends with my other passion, fly fishing.

Just two weeks after seeing my first otter, again late in the evening, I picked out two bright points of light with my torch about thirty yards downstream from our front gate. This was also the first time I heard the high pitched monotonous 'whistle' which is their trademark call. Heading quickly upstream, I lay on the bank with the torch and waited with baited breath. The calling otter came ever closer until it swam into view and as if this wasn't enough, she had two very young cubs with her. It must have been one of their first forays out from the

safety of the holt and I remember thinking how vulnerable those dark bundles of wet fur looked when they climbed out onto a shingle bank opposite me. The bitch otter re-entered the stream and fished the deeper outside bend before returning to the cubs unfortunately without a kill. They moved on upstream passing within yards of me, one of the cubs calling continually until the sound died away into the distance.

The bitch and cubs used Westford Water on average every four days for over a year, travelling upstream one night and passing back down the next. One evening I even heard the cubs calling over the noise from the television through a closed double glazed window! I of course did not see them every time (on average once every four to five weeks) but otters are creatures of habit and subsequently can be easy to track so I soon got to know their paths, sprinting points and unmistakable seal.

As the cubs grew there was an obvious size difference between the two, most probably a dog and a bitch. The months went by and as their confidence grew they were less dependent on their mother and I would often see them playing in the stream without her especially in high water. One of my fondest memories is watching one of the cubs diving porpoise-like through the water whilst the other cub would come up and ambush from below. I could have watched them all evening but unfortunately one of my dogs barked and the games came abruptly to a halt, both otters instantly disappearing under the cover of the mud stained water.

Another memorable and enlightening time was watching a small bitch otter moving methodically from one weed bed to the next, slowly swimming under the weed to the roots, presumably feeling her way with her sensitive whiskers and feeding on the many loaches, bullheads and occasional eels that dwell here.

Earlier I mentioned the loud 'whistle-like' call otters make which seems to be used to identify each other and to keep in contact especially between cubs and mother. I have also heard solitary animals use this call when they venture forth to hunt at dusk which has bagged me a couple of otters seen on the Tone. As well as the 'whistle' I have also heard them at close quarters 'chattering and yickering' especially when playing. Once at dusk on the Tone, I heard the almost demonic sound of an otter hunting through thick overhanging brambles after a duck that was understandably panic stricken. The otter sounded almost human and I could only liken it to 'gleeful laughter with evil intent' before the duck was silenced.

More recently on the Tone and well after midnight, I heard the usual call of an otter someway downstream from my house at Greenham so armed with my trusted torch I ran down and waited to the side of the bridge. I watched the otter swim purposely by and as is often the case it appeared oblivious to my presence. About five minutes later the whistling stopped and suddenly there was an almighty row as what only could have been a vicious fight between two otters began, the aggressive yickering and splashing carrying far in the still night air.

One aspect that never ceases to amaze me is the spellbinding way that otters seem to become part of the river itself and can seemingly disappear without trace when seconds earlier the animal was almost underfoot. There can be few sights more enchanting than watching a wild otter either hunting or at play and I know I will never tire of seeing these true masters of the river.

There is no doubt that we are fortunate to have what would appear to be a healthy population of otters on the Tone at present but past experience has shown that this can quickly change. The otter is one of our most vulnerable top predators so the time we put in and the vigilance we show as members of the otter group is vital for monitoring their progress.

NEW BOOK

James Williams has just written a book called "The Otter Among Us." Details of a special offer for Somerset Wildlife Trust members are to be found in the Trust's January Newsletter.

NEXT MEETING

The next meeting will be on **Monday 19th February**, at the **RSPCA Centre**, West Hatch, Taunton at **7.30 p.m.** The RSPCA Centre is at ST 278198, about 5 km southeast of Junction 25 on the M5, off the A 358. The road is signposted for the centre coming from both directions.