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**SOMERSET WILDLIFE TRUST
THE OTTER GROUP**

**NEWSLOTTER 8
July 2000**

There was a good attendance at the meeting in February; we were pleased to welcome several new members. Liz Biron from SERC showed us charts which illustrated how our efforts have strengthened SERC's hand; she emphasised the importance of recording negative results. This would be especially important at the May 2-Day Event this year, the year when the National Otter Survey is to be repeated.

Members were very supportive of the idea of doing a second coordinated check at a different time of year, in case there is a seasonal bias in our results. It was decided to encourage everybody to do it during the weekend before the next meeting on Monday 9th October.

TWO DAY EVENT

This year's 2-Day Event was held a week later than usual, but we still got the traditional help from the weather; river conditions were good for surveying, although the extra growth of the waterside plants was a hindrance in lowland areas, and summer penning made parts of the Levels difficult. Rather more people than usual were away, or too busy to attend the lunch meeting at the Victory Inn, and had to phone in their results. The only drawback to this is that the coverage map does not include all their negative sites, but we do get the main information we need, the indications of otter activity on the Saturday night.

With some 70 members we now have a very good level of coverage, yet we always have to write a numbers of our otters in as 'Assumables'.

This would be an interesting mystery for some of you to put your minds round: we have very thorough coverage, yet otters seem to slip the net. How? Do they wander off to somebody else's survey area, do they slip away to a tiny sidestream or a garden pond, or do they remain in the area but just cease to display their spraints for a day or two?

RESULTS: much the same as last year; we definitely bagged 24 otters on the night, and can assume another 11 or 12. Remember that this is based on the strictly stingy rule that each positive site contains only one solo otter, it is more a count of the number of areas positive than of otters found.

When the records are put onto a map, they show that there has been no significant difference from last year. The Exmoor rivers, the Tone, the Parrett and the Isle remain strong, but the Levels are still very sparsely populated compared to what one might expect.

We claimed otters from *Exe*(1) *Barle*(2) *Avill*(1) *Washford*(1) *Tone*(8) *Parrett*(2) *Isle*(2) *Yeo*(1) *Cannington*(1) *KSD*(1) *Brue*(1) *Huntspill*(1) **Total 22**

We assumed otters on the *Donniford*, *Porlock*, *Haddeo*, *Tone*(*Back Str*), *West Sedgemoor*, *Ding*, *Yeovil area*, *Axe*(*S*), *Culm*, *Brue*(*Lydford area*), *Mells/Frome*, **Total 11**.

To this one could probably add another one or even two, for the *Axe*(*N*), and the *Catcott/Westhay* area. Which gives a final score of **34** or **35** otter areas. Last year it was **37**.

BIRTHS AND DEATHS

It has been a winter and spring of unprecedented carnage. The number of otters collected for postmortem from the three counties of the South-West passed last year's annual total in the first three months of the new millennium.

Worst affected river round here has been the *Axe*(*S*), where 6 dead adults were found in the winter; at least four of them were bitches, and two were lactating, so the loss to that catchment is in excess of eight. James Williams checked the area in mid June when the conditions were very good, and found evidence of five otters still active. It would have been interesting to know how many of these were present with the dead ones during the winter, and how many were recent immigrants. But it is reassuring to know there are several left.

In addition dead otters were found during the first six months of the year at *Barle*(1) *Exe*(3) *Avill*(2) *Donniford*(1) *Tone* (2) *Parrett*(1) *Culm*(1) *Brue/S.Dr*(2). Total for 6 months - 17. A few years ago we were horrified to have this sort of total for the year!

Several showed signs of having been in fights, and a cub found in the *Brue* moors had to be put down by a vet because it had been so badly bitten by another otter. In Cornwall two otters were so busy fighting in the road that they were run over by one car; post-mortem revealed that one of them had recently eaten a small otter cub. I wonder if this was a very exceptional event, or just something that otters, like lions, do to each other.

More happily, I have records of at least 7 sets of cubs for the same period. However, if each of these bitches rears two cubs we are still in deficit for the period. Except that there must be cubs we never hear about, as of course there are otters which die in their holts that we never find.

FISHERIES RAIDED

During the winter the Otters and Rivers Project mounted an initiative to help fishery owners and fish breeders to mitigate the damage they might receive from otters taking their stock. There were several instances in Somerset. Carp seem especially vulnerable; they are stocked at amazing densities in some places, and become sluggish, and therefore easy targets, when the water is cold. It is often quite easy to fence the otters out, especially if an electric wire is incorporated.

One of the cases, near Martock, received a lot of media attention; here the owner hit on the ingenious solution of rigging up a television, and playing old movies all through the small hours to the baffled otters. It seems to drive them away. If you hear of such a case of predation, get the owner to contact the Otter and Rivers Project via James Williams. But please stress that they are natural wild animals, and that they have not been released around here. Publicity following damage caused by the ill thought-out release of 17 otters into the upper Thames has made some carp breeders understandably suspicious; their carp require a long time to grow, and a considerable degree of skilled husbandry. They are understandably very expensive. But luckily most lakes can be protected quite legally.

DNA UPDATE.

Karen reports that funding to pay for the development of the stored backlog of spraints has now arrived. Well done the Environment Agency. The samples are on their way to a commercial lab in Manchester, which has been trying out the techniques on a few trial samples, with an encouraging initial degree of success.

The backlog covers mainly the Tone, but also some from the Brue, and takes the survey up to the late spring of 2000, having started in mid 1997. This should provide a very good description of those populations, and tell us what questions to ask ourselves, thus pointing out how we ought to proceed with this unique and unparalleled study. Once Karen has some idea of the design of the future programme, we can then start to attract the money to pay for its continuance. The next phase could start in the autumn/early winter, and the gap of a few months in the collection of samples should not affect the continuity of the study too badly.

POSTMORTEMS

Vic Simpson is still working on the dead otters, at the MAFF labs down in Truro. Poor man, he has been on heavy overtime and big doses of midnight oil this year, but he is getting some very interesting results, and wants us to keep on sending in every corpse. Remember, do not freeze it if you can avoid it, and contact either the **Environment Agency** or **James Williams**, as soon as possible.

Dead mink are now also required. They go to **Langford Veterinary Centre**, near Bristol. Don Jefferies is working on a paper on why these new imports have declined so drastically; he inclines to the view that they are avoiding or displaced by the returning otters. Others are interested in the finding that several mink from the Thames have been suffering from Aleutian Disease. So there should be some interesting debating material to read quite soon, and we ought to be sure to record all evidence of mink as we do our surveys, in case we can contribute to this study of a species in crisis. A species, moreover (good word, moreover!) which may well turn out to have a bearing on the fortunes of OUR animal, the superb otter.

NATIONAL OTTER SURVEY

We are right in the middle of the 4th National Survey; James Williams has done the Exmoor sites in Somerset, and the eastern end of the county is due to be looked at in October. Philip Smith, of Bradford-on Tone, has been taken on to do some of the surveying; he is working in areas without an otter person, or in vast and over-ottered counties like Devon, where they need extra help. The report is due out in the spring of next year.

Unfortunately the whole of the centre of Somerset, 50kms east from Blue Anchor, to the far end of the levels, is a white square, and is never looked at in this series of surveys. The intention is for Somerset Otter Group to "do" it anyway, by a compilation of your records and a bit of infilling. As it seems from what people say that the counties to our east, Wiltshire and Dorset, although improving, still have a much thinner population of otters than we do at the Exmoor and Tone end of Somerset, it is important for us to seize this chance of defining the current frontier of the otters' expansion. We will offer the result to the National Survey as complementary information; it should also enable us to define any areas where there may be some sort of a problem for the otter population; we will also quantify our mink.

So for all these reasons it is important that you contribute to the early October coordinated survey.

STOP PRESS

Bad news that a bitch otter carrying a small cub was knocked down on the road in mid-morning near Thorney, on the Parrett

WORLD RECORD

Nevil Pitman is claiming a world record. He was called to examine a monstrous pile of fish bones in a disused room of a converted watermill on the top of the Brue. It turned out to be a huge heaps of spraints, so huge that he decided to count them: 333, give or take a couple.

RIVER AVON

Recently there have been interesting signs of otters on various parts of the R. Avon to the north of us. As this major river winds in and out of several counties, the full extent of this revival was hard to ascertain, but now there is an initiative to co-ordinate survey results for all parts of this catchment. Simon Reece, from Clifton College, is organising things, and several of our volunteers are involved.

NEXT EVENT

A repeat of the May coordinated survey, during the weekend of **7th and 8th October**. Please try to do your patch both days; should you only be able to manage one day, be sure to record the presence of dead fresh, overnight spraint. If you will be away, please let us know so that a substitute can cover for you.

The results maps will be produced the next day at our autumn meeting, **Monday 9th October**. We have been invited to use the facilities of the **RSPCA centre**, near the Nags Head Pub, where we met in February. Those who cannot attend the evening meeting should phone their results through beforehand, direct to James Williams on

OTTERS ARE OFF

Russell Gomm.

I usually try to walk 'my' stretch of the Tone (motorway to Knapp Bridge) around the middle of the month, but April 2000 was frustratingly wet. Up until the 25th of the month we'd recorded about 126 mm in our plastic, garden rain-gauge and the river hadn't dropped below 7.7 metres at Creech bridge for what seemed like weeks. Puzzled sand martins fluttered under the bridge looking for the well - submerged drainage pipes where they regularly try to nest , and there were loud chorus' from the resident mallards as they tried to maintain headway against the current of cocoa coloured water.

Although the long range' forecast wasn't too good the 25th itself was fine, since I had a busy week ahead I decided to set out to see what I could see.

At my first two sites I drew complete blanks - but was rewarded by singing skylarks, and the sedge warbler who lives by the motorway bridge announcing his safe arrival for another year. The usual moorhens and mallard busied themselves at the riverside and three common sandpipers shouted alarms before lazily flapping and gliding off a hundred yards or so downstream.

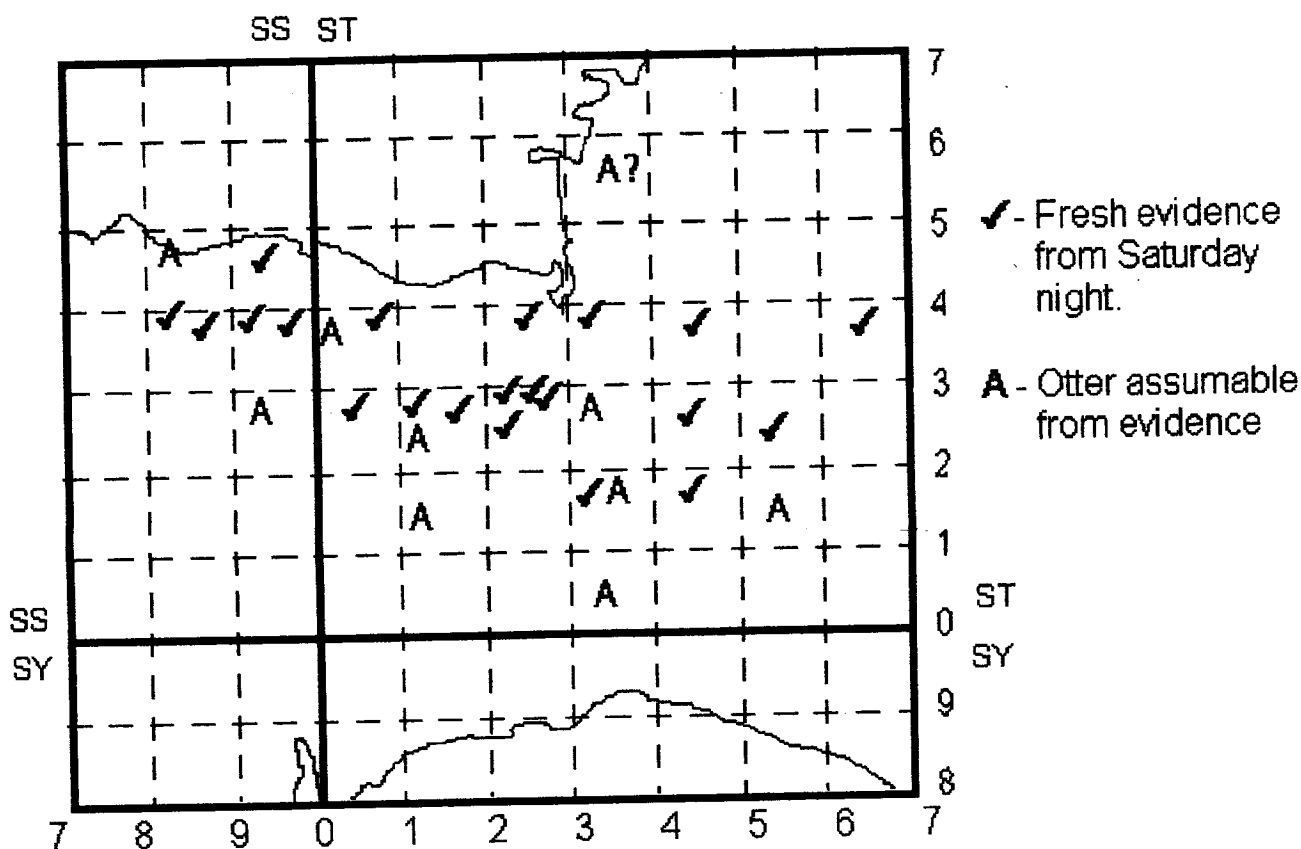
My next two sites were well underwater and two blanks followed. At this stage I'd pretty much decided that 'otters were off', but that there was still much to see and enjoy. Near Ham weir (which only showed as a ripple) I noticed footprints of badger, fox and roe deer. There were more sedge warblers and chiffchaffs. Willow warblers and blackcaps sang out from bankside and hedges as I made my way out onto the moor towards Charlton. These fields were wet ! - small shallow lakes and sinuous ponds marking the lines of previous watercourses and drainage ditches provided safe places for mallard, coot, a small flock of tufted duck and two Canada geese.

Sand martins, house martins and swallows were enjoying skimming the water in the sunshine as they picked up the insects that seemed to rise from everywhere. My last and usually most reliable site near Chariton produced a startled great crested grebe (unusual for this section of the river) but no signs of otters. In the distance I could see that Knapp bridge site was inaccessible, so I turned for home.

The light on the river and the flooded fields sparkled and for a brief time (until the next main line express or helicopter, I forget which) all I could hear was birdsong. On the way back I noticed that moles had been active at the riverside in places that only twelve hours before must have been underwater. I supposed that they must have survived in air pockets - or do they climb trees ?

On the 29th the river had dropped and there was a fresh spraint on the steps at the bottom of the garden.

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2-DAY EVENTS: Results for 97/98/99/2000

