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SOMERSET WILDLIFE TRUST

OTTER GROUP

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DNA OPEN DAY

The DNA Open Day at Exeter University was very interesting. Several of the Somerset volunteers attended. Dr Paul Chanin made us all welcome after coffee, and showed us some of the achievements so far, and what the plans for the future are. The answer is that it will all depend on the funding available, but it looks as if the Tone and the Brue will continue to be compared at least. Recent effort has concentrated on improving the lab techniques to get a higher result rate, and on increasing the number of loci developed in each sample to give a greater degree of statistical confidence in the individuality of the bar-code. Libby Andrews, who is on the National Steering Group, then explained what the overall conservation picture is at present, and what it is hoped to achieve in the near future.

This was followed by a fascinating and very knowledgeable explanation of the results of the otter post-mortems by the MAFF veterinary pathologist, Vic Simpson. Last before lunch professor Steve Hughes explained what they do with the DNA, and how they are able to do it.

After lunch we were split into rotating groups; some to look at the slides each area had provided, some to examine the displays, and some to go into the labs and see what goes on up there.

OCTOBER MEETING

The Autumn meeting took place at Norton Fitzwarren on Monday 11th October. Twenty-four members were present, and we welcomed as guests Alison Washbrook from Avon Wildlife Trust, and Claire West from Exeter University. Karen Coxon gave us an update on the DNA project: despite the very late production of the report on the feasibility study, progress is being made on two fronts. There has been a lot of effort put into solving the problems in the lab work, to try to get a higher strike rate, and to eliminate uncertainties, and the Environment Agency (EA) has agreed in principle to develop the backlog of spraints collected since the end of the first stage of the project. Costings are being sought for this at present. Meanwhile we are not collecting any more spraints from the Brue etc. Karen hopes to have further news for the February meeting.

As a result of the (temporary?) halt to the DNA work, there can be no more mileage expenses: the pot is empty.

There were four resignations from the group, Catherine Mowat, Paul & Ray Reddish, John Coling and John & Sylvia Scotland. New members are John & Janet Dixon from Minehead, Simon Reece from Clifton, and Brian Jones & Glenys Richards-Jones from Burnham. The appeal for help in the North and East of the county, which we put in the last SWT magazine, does not seem to have had any result so far. This is a pity, as reports of otters in those areas keep trickling in.

HEALTHY RIVERS

The autumn meeting concluded with an excellent talk from Alan Ker, on the excellent work he has been doing to moderate the impact of agriculture on the environment, especially on the Upper Tone. As a working farmer himself he was able to show how a detailed knowledge of what farmers do, and why, is essential for repairing some of the damaged systems. His slides showed not only some of the mutilated areas, but also what a lot of good practice has been established already, and how much improvement has resulted. It was both informative and encouraging.

OTHER INTERESTING SPECIES

At recent meetings we have mentioned that SERC wants to hear from us about other watery creatures. Water Voles seem to be the flavour of the month, and to be making a tentative reappearance on some of our rivers; please be vigilant for these.

Does their reappearance have anything to do with the apparent decline in the mink population? We ought to record the presence (or absence) of these, too.

The environmentalists were saddened to learn that Signal Crayfish have been found in the Axe (South Coast), and that they have surmounted the dam at Clatworthy Reservoir, which means that there is now no refuge for the native White-Clawed Crayfish on the Tone. Both these pieces of information come from otters, who thoughtfully left large chunks of crayfish remains so that we could find them.

I do not suppose that the otters mind whether the crayfish they are munching are indigenous or introduced - in fact they probably prefer the American ones, as they are much larger and meatier, but I am told that the imports are very vigorous predators of fish eggs and fry, so they may well become a nuisance on our rivers, and even deplete the otters' resources. All sightings and leftovers to SERC, please.

Keep an eye out for Dippers, too. They feed on invertebrates in the water, so are an early indicator of problems at the base of the food chain. I feel they are much scarcer than they were, so all records from the spring/summer, when they are holding breeding territories, would be an indicator of the health of our otters' habitat.

BIRTHS AND DEATHS

A lot to report again. Since the last Newsletter we have lost 4 otters on the Axe (south), all bitches, and two of them were lactating. Also 2 on the Cary, 1 on the Isle, 1 on the Barle, 1 on the Bathern, 1 on the Lowman, 3 on the Brue, 1 on the Tone, 1 on the Avill. And 1 on the Congresbury Yeo, in N Somerset district. Although technically some of these were just over the border in otter-rich Devon, they were all part of "our" populations.

In 1999 I recorded 17 killed from my patch; Vic Simpson had 55 bodies for post-mortem from the whole of the Environment Agency's South-West Region, which covers a little bit more than Cornwall, Devon and Somerset. Bear in mind that we do not find every casualty, so this is a major leakage from these populations, which would only be of no influence if the total numbers are very much larger than we think they are; or can be, in that we believe that otters space themselves out and avoid density or chumminess.

But the worst of it is that in the first fortnight of the new millennium the EA collected no fewer than 22 corpses, that is about half of last year's total already. 7 of these were ours. Another distressing factor is that at least 11 bitches have been found on our area since 1st October. The post-mortem report suggests that usually more dogs than bitches get killed by cars.

However, there are several reports of successful breeding from a variety of rivers, including four different parts of the Tone already this year

NATIONAL RESURVEY

It has been decided by the powers that be that there is to be a repeat this year of the National Otter Survey; this will be the fourth, and will be done exactly to the same method as the first three, so that statistical comparison of trends can be made. It is in fact a year late; they are scheduled for every seventh year. The whole of England is divided up on the National Grid into a chessboard of 50 km squares, and all the black squares are checked in considerable detail. There is no attempt to measure the density or health of the otter populations, but just to find out which areas have otters present. The first survey revealed only 5% of sites positive, the third, eight years ago, only 22%. But there had been a considerable expansion of the species' range. The new survey will show whether this expansion has continued.

Somerset has two black squares in it, and James Williams has been given the task of surveying them both, a total of 77 sites to look at, each 600 metres long. The first square is mainly on Exmoor, and will be done in April; the second is in East Somerset, and will be looked at in October. The final results are promised for early next year. The pity of this system is that so much of vital importance is happening in the intervening white square, which has been omitted every time. I propose that we treat our 2-Day Event as an extension of this survey. All that will be required is some larger maps, and very great care on your part to fill in negative sites as well as positives. Then we should be able to send the results off as a sort of supplement to the national survey.

DNA UPDATE: Jan 2000

At long last the Environment Agency's report into the feasibility study has been published, and copies will be available at the next meeting. It came out a full year later than planned, having been bogged down in minor matters. I find it very sad that so innovative a project cannot be better dealt with than that, and of course the delay does imperil the results of any other study which might be built on the foundations of the research we have laid.

We provided 14 months' worth of continuous data for the rivers Tone and Brue, which, despite considerable technical difficulties with the new process in the labs, gave a sufficient number of "hits" to create a fascinating snapshot of two widely differing otter populations. In anticipation of these results being sufficiently important to warrant taking them further, we continued to collect spraint after the close of the initial study in July '98, so as to have a continuous data set for both populations.

But in the face of such overwhelming indifference by the authorities of the EA it was reluctantly decided to stop collecting any more until we could see some possibility of them being made use of. The Brue ceased first, in the summer, but the Tone

collection continued until November '99, which will give a view of that population over nearly three years when it is analysed.

The present situation is that the Agency have committed themselves verbally to funding the processing of the backlog of spraint, subject to a lab being found which can handle the techniques. Karen is currently working on this with a lab in Manchester, who have been sent a trial set of samples, and some tissues from corpses. Things are looking promising. If they find that they can go ahead we should catch up to date quite quickly, in the early Spring.

Meanwhile, however, the dynamics of the populations continue to develop out on the rivers, and already we have a three-month gap in the data set (more on the Brue). If we are to keep the continuity, we will have to resume collecting as soon as we get the green light: two of the important areas we can find out about by this technique are dispersal of young, and the ages of the otters we have. For both of these it is important to get samples from cubs early on, while they are still at their birthplace, so we cannot afford much more delay. So it looks as if we will rapidly have to resume spraint sampling, and probably look for funding to ensure the future of these very revealing and pioneering studies.

OTTERS AS PREDATORS

Several of our otters have been rather tactless in raiding fisheries this winter, mainly during the period of the floods at Christmas. The Otters and Rivers Project has been running a campaign about this, with training courses for their field workers, and a conference at Blagdon Reservoir to discuss the problem with anxious fishery owners. The main area of concern seems to have been carp ponds, but rainbow trout farms have also been visited. One cheeky otter took a trout in full daylight while the farm was being visited by the OARP predation reduction training course. Some of you will have seen on the Telly about the problem at Town Tree Farm Nature Gardens, near Martock, where the resourceful proprietor installed a TV and ran it all night to keep the otters away.

We must be very sympathetic to the proprietors; some of the fish are worth a lot of money, and represent a big investment of time and skilled husbandry. Luckily there is quite a lot that can be done in many cases to solve the problem without infringing the legal protection of the otter. Should you hear of anyone with this sort of worry, get them to get in touch with James Williams, who is now the OARP rep for Somerset.

NEW MEMBERS

There has been a flurry of interest in our activities, and several new members are already active on the riverbanks. John and Janet Dixon are looking at the Avill, now that Tony Robinson has moved house; he is looking at the Cannington Brook. Rhiannon and Tony Horrocks are taking over from the Scotlands on the Barle. James Mortimer left Serc to go to work for 'Froglife', but produced an excellent report of what he discovered on the Taunton/Bridgwater canal before he went. This important new area will be covered by Julie Crandon and Angela Barker. Others who are joining us are Mary Henry, Brian Kenny, Carolyn Gore and Helen Kemp. We hope to see many of these new faces at our next meeting, on Monday 28th February, at the Nag's Head Inn, at 7.30. This new venue is 2 miles south of motorway junction 25, where you turn off the A358 to go to the RSPCA.