

SOMERSET WILDLIFE TRUST

OTTER GROUP

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NEWSLOTTER No 6

MAY 99

FEBRUARY MEETING

The group seems to go from strength to strength. We had an excellent turn out for our February meeting and buffet supper. Cle Boyd was presented with a statuette of an otter about to slip off a rock, in appreciation of all she has contributed to the establishment and success of this group, as its secretary since its inauguration. We are all glad she is continuing as an active member; her wealth of wisdom and ottery experience, which she is always willing to share with newer members, is one of our most valuable assets. Mary-Rose Lane, the wetlands officer of the Devon Wildlife Trust, gave us a very informative talk on the Lifestyle of the Otter, with marvellous slides. We must repeat this at regular intervals, not only for the newer members, but to remind us all about the animal itself while we search for its spraints. Another fascinating insight was given by Capt. Geoff Eccleston, RM, who brought along a video of an otter caught intruding into Norton Manor camp by the security cameras.

Saranne Cessford, who kindly volunteered to take on the secretaryship from Cle, has been very busy collating all the results from the previous year, and to getting all our information onto the computer. This will no doubt save her time in the end, but it is a valiant labour to undertake initially. So she was pleased that so many of the results came in so promptly.

2 DAY EVENT

Another good meeting was the lunch after the 2 Day Event. The weather recognised the needs of this important occasion yet again, and about 60 people took part. We are indebted to the trainees from SERC who gave up their weekend to help us out with some important gaps; without this help the event would have been a much less meaningful exercise. The otters were less aware than the weather forecasters of what was expected of them, and again showed why they have a reputation for being as elusive as soap in a bath. Several well-known otters tantalised their patrons by providing only stale evidence. All we require is one fresh set of prints, or a small but overnight fresh spraint. It is not much to ask for, once a year, but some of them delight in being difficult.

Nevertheless we recorded 20 cooperative otters, which had provided definite overnight evidence, but we had to assume as many as 17 others; total 37. Last year we scored 21 and 11, total 32, and the year before, 18 and 7, total 25. Remember that these are minimum scores. Even when we know there is a bitch with cubs, we score only one per area. The results are therefore more properly "areas with an otter", rather than "otters found".

The main value of doing this coordinated overnight survey is that it should eliminate a false impression of too many otters, which could be caused by a few otters wandering widely, and being claimed by several surveyors. In this respect we have to be careful about the elusive and only assumable records. Please consider the ones in your area, very suspiciously: can we be sure that each one really exists as a separate animal, and that they are not wanderers who have also put in their appearance in these records on a different stretch. Should pollution or disease ever reduce our otter population again, that is what would happen; the survivors would wander much more widely. If we were complacent and not vigilant, we could easily fail to notice such a decline until very late in its damage. Especially as having to put "Assumable" for a whole river is almost certainly a significant understatement of the numbers present, although it is all we can do under the 'rules' of this sort of event.

RESULTS

Otters were located on:

Axe (S), Barle, Exe (2), Quarme, Bathern, Tone (5), Isle (3), Parrett, Yeo, Huntspill, Brue, Axe (N). **Total 20**

Otters were assumable on:

Horner, Aller, Avill, Haddeo, Williton, Donniford, Danesbrook/Barle, Exe at Exebridge, 3 tributaries of the Tone (Hillfarrance, Halse, Back Str.), Kings Sedgemoor Dr., South Dr. at Shapwick, Hinkley, Cannington/Bridgwater, Yeo above Yeovil, and Mells/Frome.
Total 17

There are two things we could do about these shy otters. You could arrange to check your patch in coordination with your neighbouring surveyors on occasional months, to see if the otters are doubling up in the record. And if your patch seems to be one of those which frequently turns up an "assumable", perhaps you might find a few more check points to make it harder for the otter to get away with it. But that the system we employ gives a fairly accurate picture of what is going on is shown by the paucity of the Somerset Levels again. This disappointing state of affairs is confirmed by the work some of you have been doing for Karen's DNA research: The monthly DNA checks on the Brue show equally low numbers, judging from the fewness of the collectable spraints each month. However Karen was very pleased with the large number of samples the 2-Day Event provided.

THE BRIDGWATER TWO

In February two very young otter cubs were found jauncing down a busy road in the middle of a trading estate in Bridgwater, in the early afternoon. They were picked up before the traffic flattened them, and went to the RSPCA; luckily Steve Powell, one of our members, was on duty there. It was decided to try to find their mother, so Karen Coxon and James and Elizabeth Williams spent half the night driving round the more improbable parts of Bridgwater trying to locate a brick-pit that might have been their home. They were unsuccessful, so reluctantly the cubs were returned to West Hatch RSPCA centre, the cosy luxury of which they were probably delighted to see again.

They have been moved to an 'orphanage' in Hampshire, where they are being reared in a 'hands-off' manner, in the hope that they may one day be returned to the wild, if they do not become too tame- They have appeared on the Pet Rescue programme on TV.

THE DNA RESEARCH

Karen Coxon reports:

Many thanks to all who have worked so hard to provide such a strong set of samples. The results of the pilot programme to see if the method was viable and worthwhile have been finalised, and the full report is now being printed. Copies should be available in late June.

Basically, most of the initial problems were ironed out in this first year, and the results are already most informative about the relative strengths of the four populations being compared. There were two snags however, which mean that the focus of work since the trial year has been on sorting methods out in the lab. rather than concentrating on field studies. Firstly, it is necessary to try to level out the rate of successful development of the samples. I know that some of you were disappointed when all your hard-sought spraints did not turn out a result in some months. The second snag was peculiar to Hampshire, where two otters gave the same set of readings. There is no reason to suppose that this happened anywhere else; it was probably a product of inbreeding

in the artificial population of released otters. But progress is being made to sort these glitches out.

Meanwhile members of the otter group have been very generous of their time in keeping up a supply of samples from the Tone and the Brue. These have been stored in the very deep freezer at Exeter (-70C); they are all to be developed in June, so there should be interesting progress all of a sudden in our knowledge of these two populations, with detailed information on a regular basis since October 97. This will be an unique set of records.

In the future it looks as if I will be concentrating on the Tone and the Brue, and hope that the Somerset Otter Group will be able to continue their invaluable help with the study of these two areas, and the surrounding rivers, which are where the young otters may disperse to.

THAMES RELEASES

Some of you may have seen the articles in the papers about two sets of releases into the R. Thames, with pictures of Sir David Attenborough cuddling two otters of the wrong species. There has been some degree of controversy about these two events, which seem to have generated a kind of rivalry between them, and doubts have been expressed about the method used at one site, where the same pen is being used for a succession of releases; it is thought that this may lead to fighting.

Although it is all a long way away from here, it is still relevant to the work of our group. The fact that the releases are necessary shows that the over-vaunted expansion of the otters may have been exaggerated, or that it has stowed down. There have been no recent signs of the otters at the top of the Thames about which there was so much publicity a couple of years ago. This emphasises the importance of our monitoring work in Somerset, where we are fortunate in having a viable population at the West of the county. The frontier of the otters' expansion runs through the centre of Somerset, so we must continue to be vigilant about it.

The powers that be have decided to use copious amounts of scarce conservation money in repeating the English National Survey this autumn, the fourth in the series. It will be very interesting to see the results, in view of the alleged slowed-down expansion. Somerset, with its frontier of otters, is a *white' square, and so normally excluded from the national surveys, which look at only the 'black' squares on the chessboard of England. However, I understand that they are to seek help with the white squares this time, to make it more complete, so the Otter Group's expertise may be called on. More details should be available by the Autumn meeting.

OTTER CONSERVATION SORT OUT

One of the possible reasons that the otters are not recovering as fast as they should may be that the poor creatures cannot make head nor rudder of all the different organisations involved in their conservation; they may not even have a key to all the sets of initials. JNCC, EA, EN, RSNC, FWAG, SOG, BAP, OARP, DOE, DETR, SEPA, IUCN, ETC. There is even a "Steering group": no doubt this is where the rudders come in. But not to worry; we won't have to sit on the river bank explaining it all to our baffled customers. It looks as if steps are being taken to coordinate it all.

A new national director, Lisa Schneidau, has just taken up her post. There is to be a big conference in London in early June, called the National Otter Forum. All the main sets of initials will be represented, so some streamlining should happen as a result. More locally, a new coordinating set-up has been started to gather together all the threads of conserving the four species of riparian mammal, Otter, Water Vole, Water Shrew and Mink. This should save a lot of duplication of effort and paper work, and ensure that positive research is given priority for funding.

Another new group has recently held its first meeting at Fyne Court. The Somerset Mammal Group is a joint venture between the Somerset Environment Records Centre and the Mammal Society. Their aim is to encourage the systematic surveying of those many mammals which are at present underrecorded in Somerset. They are starting with water voles, dormice and deer. Their AGM is to be on 8th September:
 Details from Alison Tutt, 01278 641131.

DEAD OTTERS

Several to report again, I'm afraid

Jan 99	Tone, nr Wellington,	Dog
Jan 99	Isle trib., Staple Fitzpaine,	Dog
Jan 99	Tone, nr Milverton	Dog
Jan 99	Sowey, Middlezoy	??
Jan 99	Exe, Exebridge	Dog
Mar 99	Tone Bathealton	Bitch
June 99	Sowey Othery	??

Most of these went to Truro for post-mortem. The Environment Agency has just brought out a report on the first lot of findings. 12 of the 77 they examined were ours. 83% were run over on the roads, but 16% had wounds from fighting. When you consider that the period 1988 to 1996 was not one of great otter abundance that must be rather worrying. They cannot have been under great pressure from over-dense population, so why so many fights?

Ask for R&D Report W184.

BRIDGWATER GAP CLOSES

John Burrell, the warden of the Hinkley Point reserve, made a significant discovery when he found otter spraints near the power station earlier this year. He closed the Bridgwater Gap, or rather, the otter did. The grid squares round Bridgwater used to be famous for their otters, but they have been the slowest areas to reclaim them after the decline.

ST33 was vacant for 9 years, from 1979 to 1988. ST23 went empty in 1978, and was recolonised in 1993, a gap of 15 years. ST24 also lost its otters in '78, but had no definite record until 1999, a vacancy of 21 years. At last. Is it a good sign that they have come back, or a bad one that it has taken them so long to cover such a short distance in what seems good otter country?

PREDATION

Otters are of course large and efficient predators. Luckily, most of what they take in this area is either small and inconsidered fish like sticklebacks or minnows, or eels, which are undervalued as commercial fish in this country. But from time to time they can make a commercial nuisance of themselves, particularly when a small pond is heavily stocked with fish. "Our" otters have been in a couple of carp ponds this winter, and have had a good go at a garden stock of ornamental trout and at a lake with signal crayfish. The reaction of the owners varied in its intensity, but none were thrilled, exactly.

There is now an initiative to give advice as to how these raids can be mitigated. A lot can be achieved at little cost, very often, for instance by electric netting. If you should hear of this sort of problem, steer the pond owner towards the Environment Agency.

ODDS AND ENDS.

Any more sightings of blank castles? I thought I found one yesterday, but it was just a bad shot by a cub, I think. Assuming of course that an otter still with its parent would be making a castle. Mass spraintings seem to be a winter phenomenon. Do you agree? My otters seemed to concentrate very heavily on the frogs this year. Did anybody find them doing the same to toads? I do not know of a mass toad spawning place.

Remember to record other watery creatures, please. Water Shrew is an unknown quantity, as nobody has ever recorded them. I saw my first Water Vole for several years this week, swimming across the Acid Drain. Congratulations to the EA; it is now much cleaner. In my note book at least, live Mink are rarer than dead otters this year. I hope the reason is not environmentally sinister. I cannot think that such a massive decline in mink can be entirely due to man and traps.

Perhaps we could talk about this sort of thing at our NEXT MEETING, on **MONDAY 11th OCTOBER**, at the **VICTORY INN**, at **7.30pm**. Alan Ker, of FWAG, will talk to us about the work he has been doing in restoring the habitat on the R. Tone.

Motorway M5 Refurbishment works.

From Russell Gomm:

Back in September 1998, details were released of major works to be carried out over a six month period to refurbish the M5 motorway bridge over the River Tone near Taunton. This is an important area for wildlife, in particular otters moving between Taunton and the moors below Creech St. Michael.

The Somerset Wildlife Trust contacted the agents for the work (W.S. Atkins) expressing concern about such aspects as the siting of temporary buildings, storage of materials and machinery, noise, dust, pollution and strong lighting associated with overnight working.

Following a site meeting with the agents the Trust was offered the opportunity to monitor the whole operation for its effects on river wildlife, and otters in particular.

Between October 1998 and the end of May 1999, Russell Gomm made a total of 73 visits to the bridge and to sites downstream as far as Ruishton. He was supported by regular visits upstream of the motorway by James Williams, Paul Kennedy and Bry McLaren who also put in many hours.

The full results of the work will shortly be written up for the Somerset Wildlife Trust and the Agents. It does seem however that the works may have had relatively little effect on the activity of the otters and their use of the River as a highway and means of crossing the M5 'corridor'.

Throughout the works, recent signs (padding or spraints) were found within 100 yards or so of the works on 25 occasions out of the 73. On 18 visits signs were found beneath the bridge itself, within a few metres of scaffolding and other works. There were lengthy periods of absence, but these were just as likely to have been due to the condition of the river (floods etc.) and normal otter movement along the river, as they were to the works. There was no great difference between frequency recorded at the bridge and that derived from daily recording carried out during the same period at a site below Creech St. Michael.

Throughout, monthly contact was maintained with the Agents, who in turn frequently reminded contractors of the sensitivity of the site, and, as far as we know, disturbance and damaging activities were kept to a minimum.

Our thanks are due to W.S. Atkins for their readiness to recognise the significance of the site and the need for careful working.

A Note on Filling in your Otter Forms:

From Saranne:

The following notes may help you filling in your annual Otter forms, and will hopefully help me and the SERC recorders in keeping the databases correct and clear. Please note the forms begin with the May 2-day event, and end with the April Survey.

1. Grid Reference and Site Name are essential. If there is no obvious name for the site on the map, use the river name plus a number: e.g. Barle 1.
2. The Catchment refers to the Principal river into which your waterway ultimately drains. The waterway is the stream, tributary or river on which the site is located. E.g. Danesbrook is in the Exe Catchment.
3. A brief description is a great help for anyone covering for you if you can't do your sites. A few words will suffice: e.g. Rocks US of bridge, RB. (Rocks upstream of bridge on the right bank). I do note these in the database, and can therefore quickly extract them to pass on to anyone covering the sites.
4. Please enter the date (day of the month) when you did the survey. If you can't do your survey, please put N/S under the month.
5. Negative results: These are a useful part of the survey, so please note them, either with a dash or a zero. When you can't reach a site because of conditions it would be useful if you could add a comment to that effect, e.g. HWL (High water levels).
6. Positive results: A number of sightings is more useful than a tick: If the sightings are too numerous or too mixed up to decipher do please indicate this, and give an estimate of the number if you can.
7. Comments: Your comments are always interesting, and add value to the survey. I do make a note of them in the database, and SERC are also interested in sightings or indications of other mammals and some of the scarcer birds etc.

If you can follow these guidelines, it will help me with entering the data quickly and accurately. ~~If you find a better site near one you have previously been recording, can you make a note of the original site which is being replaced, so that my site records don't get muddled.~~

My thanks for all the hard work that has gone into collecting and recording the results. I do have a more complete record of the results than the summary which was distributed at the May lunch, but as this runs to 10+ pages I have not printed it out for general distribution. For anyone who is really interested I'll be happy to print it and send it to you. If you only want a particular area, let me know. I can extract records by Catchment, by River and even by Surveyor.

Saranne Cessford

discuss on site map available.