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SOMERSET WILDLIFE TRUST

THE OTTER GROUP

NEWSLOTTER 10

JUNE 2001

CLOSURE AND CANCELLATION

I wonder if the otters wonder where we have been all spring and summer. The deserted countryside, with no fishermen, no walkers, no otter group members under the bridges must seem to them very quiet all of a sudden. In my view, that will make very little difference to their lives, but I have half expected to get a few complaints from the otters themselves about overgrown footpaths; they make full use of our routes for ease of getting about, and must be rather fed-up at all the overgrowth impeding their travels.

Our thoughts have rightly been with the farmers, and the authorities in Somerset have been vindicated by the recent sad series of outbreaks on the Tone for resisting the pressures put on them to open up too soon. Others have lost a lot too, most obviously the tourism suppliers, a very wide category which includes such as antique sellers as well as B&Bs or tearooms, but it is hard to imagine the extent of the personal devastation that a farmer must feel to see the proud results of many years skilful breeding and husbandry being slung dripping into a truck.

We have rightly kept well away from the land. Not only would it have been illegal to survey in many places, it would have been irresponsible and insensitive. The OAR officer for Yorkshire told me that in the Dales a group of ramblers had been going about posting up homemade "Path Open" notices. I hope they set the collies on them.

So the 2-day Event was cancelled, and we will have a gap in our monthly records of at least five months, or more on the Tone. The eastern half of the national otter survey is still unfinished, thanks to the winter floods as well as the disease. The national aim is to cover 3328 sites, but on the day of the meeting which was to have included the launch of the results and report, there remained 501 sites still to do, a reminder of the extent and the extreme severity of the weather.

If large areas are to be reopened before the dry weather breaks, we will have to exercise some caution. Results from a survey at a time of very low water may well be unrepresentative of the true situation; it was held as axiomatic up in the north that the otters abandoned the main rivers in low flows. Do any of our members have either confirmation or contradiction of this theory?

DEATHS

Sadly, we have still been able to send off corpses to the Environment Agency for autopsy. The total for the first six months of the year is 13, one of which was a Devon otter. As one would expect, nearly all were killed before the summer weather set in, while the rivers were still very full. Whether this is good news or bad I am not sure: is 11 in two months better than 13 in 6? Worst hit area was again the North Exmoor area of the river Avill and Timberscombe, with 3 deaths.

The Parrett also scored 3, or 4 if you include its tributary the Isle, where an injured large cub had to be put down; it had been severely bitten by another otter

Several of the 13 were not recovered for post-mortem. By the time the news gets through the body has gone. I wonder how many more there are that we never hear about. "Number 14" was a very positive, if delayed, phone call. Cle Boyd went straight out and scoured the site, but found nothing except some badger hair. Was it a mistake, or another body that vanished: we shall never know.

FEBRUARY MEETING

It seems ages since our last meeting, again very generously hosted by the RSPCA at West Hatch. It was well attended, and a lot of lively chat and discussion went on. Very good to see some of our new members too.

Saranne's excellent minutes covered it all of course, but one or two points can be updated. The injured otter that had been brought in that day was the Isle juvenile which had to be put down. The Somerset part of the National Survey is still incomplete, but a little progress was made after the meeting and before the F&M disease. The Parrett gave a very strong result, but the Brue was comparatively weak. This confirms what we already knew, that Somerset sits astride the frontier of the otters' recolonisation. Which is why the group's surveys are so significant.

The DNA remains inconclusive. Some results have been published, but they cannot be fully related to otters on the ground until a key person returns from an extended trip away. Like the horizon, we progress optimistically towards it. Maybe by the time of the autumn meeting?!?

OARP/WATER FOR WILDLIFE

The national network known as the Otters and Rivers Project has drawn to a close and is to be succeeded/ reborn/ developed as Water For Wildlife. It is as yet unclear how Somerset Wildlife Trust will mesh into this new five-year initiative, but much of the intended emphasis on wetland habitats, river restoration and other species such as dragonflies and water voles is already well in hand on a daily basis in Somerset, of course.

BIRTHS

However, look on the bright side; there have been a few reports of cubs. In fact Paul Tillsley rescued two from the A396 in broad daylight, where they were causing a bit of a traffic jam. And it wasn't him that got bitten! Cubs are reassuring, because the first sign of a new insidious pollutant would be a cessation of breeding.

MINK

Please record any signs or sightings of these close relatives of the otter. They seem to be in serious recession round here, although they are still spreading into new areas up country, and flourishing to the detriment of other things like water fowl or water voles. This is not just as a result of soft-brained burglars liberating them from farms; in many areas they are doing very well naturally, it seems. But apparently not round here.

Which poses the question, what is happening in Somerset? We used to have galore of mink about ten years ago. One researcher has produced figures to show that mink avoid otters; they may feel threatened and move away, or they may have to go to less suitable parts of the habitat where they can breed less well, or they may have had to leave the riversides and in fact be getting on quite well away from the water, and it is just that we don't notice them as much.

Another pointer is that the mink in at least one area have signs of a disease. There are strong indications, but short of proof, that otters can also get this imported illness, "Aleutians Disease". Another reason to take a strong interest in these lively little imports is that a laboratory wants some corpses as part of a programme to find out just how widespread TB is in wildlife. Ten years ago we could have sent them any amount, but nowadays mink seem to be very uncommon indeed. Keep full records, and gather up any dead on the roads.

THE OTTERS AMONG US OR US AMONG THE OTTERS

From Janet and John Dixon

I expect like us you have experienced withdrawal symptoms from your "otters". As the Foot and Mouth epidemic broke over the country we had 2 otters killed on roads within a few miles of each other in our area on February 22 and 25. These were both females weighing 4.5 and 5.5 kg approximately, both road traffic accidents with broken backs and both looking in superb condition - could they have been sisters! They sadly occupied 2 shelves in our freezer for a few weeks until we could get them over to the Environment Agency at Bridgwater. Normally when we have a death on our patch we rush out and monitor our sites, remove any evidence and monitor again in 5 or 6 days time to see if we still have an otter(s) on our river system and usually we have. This time we were unable to do this because of the restrictions. This was all the more frustrating because these deaths brought the total to 6 in 15 months on our small river and 5 we know were RTAs - all in different locations.

We have come to the conclusion that a few days before we are due to monitor our sites the otters of our area hold a meeting and plan their strategy to further confuse the Dixons.

For example an otter was seen in daylight on a tiny stream which runs along the bottom of some gardens in Carhampton January. In March we were asked to visit a disused tomato farm in Carhampton where there was a small reservoir 15 x 12 metres, which is now full of fish. Fish bones had been seen on the edge of the reservoir in mid February and on March 20th. Sure enough there were 3 otter spraints. The owner is monitoring this site for us and is thrilled to have an otter around, but there is no new evidence to date.



In the middle of April 2 otter cubs were found "playing" in the middle of the road between Wheddon Cross and Bridgetown. Several motorists had stopped to photograph them. Luckily they were spotted by a member of the Exmoor Natural History Society who caught them and took them down to the river.

Casting round for streams which we do not normally monitor and which were accessible we did the Parks Walk in Minehead. This is a linear walk following the Bratton stream and sure enough in the middle with houses backing onto the stream was a fresh spraint. We also work as volunteers on the WSR and as one of the RTA's was at Aquasplash near to the Seaward Way level crossing we checked the ditch which runs round Butlins. 20 metres from the busy road a culvert from the ditch goes under the footpath (which runs parallel to the ditch) and comes into a small not particularly wholesome ditch on railway land, which runs parallel to the railway line. Here we found a fresh spraint and there was another one every week for the next three weeks.

Dunster Marsh is an area covered with drainage ditches full of eels and fish and behind Dunster beach are lakes full of fish up to a metre in length. In fact the lakes are so full that the owner would be delighted for otters to come and cull a few. We usually find fresh evidence here, but there has been none over the period of the spraints on the railway ditch. With all this abundance of food what are they doing in a tiny ditch by a busy main road or in a populated park?

Are the otters among us or are we among the otters I II

THE OTTER AMONG US

A brief review of James' new book, by the Dixons

I have been hooked on otters since I read "Ring of Bright Water" as a young teenager and consequently I have read everything I could find on the subject, so when I saw an advertisement for James Williams's "The Otter Among Us" I had to read it.

This book is different from all the others I have read. Most of them are interesting to someone fascinated by otters, but only James Williams could write a book, packed full of information, but an enjoyable read for people who do not share my passion for these wonderful animals. Those of us who are privileged to know the man can hear his voice from every page as though he were sitting in a comfortable armchair explaining his findings in that articulate, enthusiastic manner of his. His passion and devotion to these animals shines through and above all the realisation that in spite of all his knowledge he is still learning too.

The book is a mine of information and as a reference book it has replaced all others on my bookshelf. It is already being reread and is constantly thumbed through each time with unfailing delight.

All my special friends will be receiving a copy for Christmas.

Map Reading

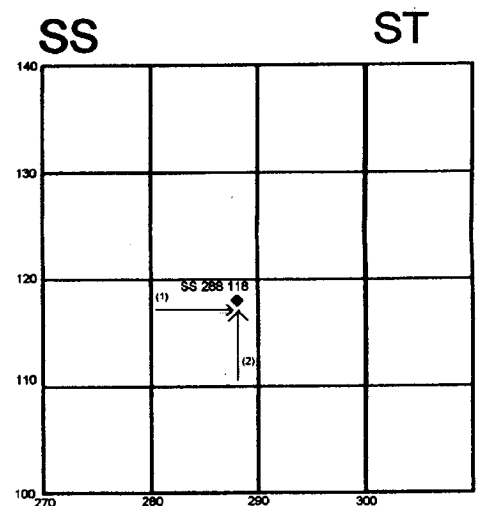
From Karen Coxon:

Whilst putting last years data onto her GIS data base Saranne has been a little surprised at some of the locations, for example there are some interesting spraint finds from the middle of the Bristol Channel. Whilst I applaud such wonderful dedication to the cause perhaps a little refresher course on map reading might be helpful!

The UK as a whole is divided up into 100 km squares, each with a unique two letter code. Please make sure you have the correct letters designating the 100-km square within which your site falls. It is very easy to slip from SS to ST and could explain some of our more interesting recordings. The letters are identified in each corner of the sheet as well as along the margins where the sheet covers two adjacent 100km grids and the letters change. Most of us use the 1:50 000 landranger maps which is about 1 Bins to the mile, or 2 cm to the km. At this scale the full National Grid will be marked, with each map divided into squares with the lines running almost exactly due north to south and east to west. These grid lines are spaced at 1km intervals. Site locations are identified by the unique two letter code, for most of our sites this will be SS or ST followed by a six figure grid reference. The first three numbers always represent the easting (horizontal), the second three the northing (vertical). Just remember you crawl along the ground before you learn to walk upright.

To generate the six digits:

- first identify the km square which contains the feature/site (bridge, weir etc) that you want to assign the grid reference to;
- identify the first vertical grid line to the west (left) of the site and follow this line down to bottom of the sheet (the numbers are all along the margin of the sheet and repeated within the map at intervals) this will give you a two digit number;
- (1) follow the grid line back to your site and estimate the number of tenths of a grid square your site is from that first vertical grid line to the west of your site, this gives you the third digit, this is your *easting*,
- (2) to get the *northing*, identify the horizontal grid line immediately south (below) the site and follow the line to the west (left) margin of the sheet to give you the next two digits, then again estimate how many tenths of a square your site is from that grid line to give the final digit.



The grid reference is often written as two sets of three digits, eg ST 123 123. I hope all this is clear. Please do double check all your grid references as it takes Saranne quite a lot of time to work out the source of any errors. Any questions can be clarified at the next meeting or please feel free to call me. Most Ordnance Survey maps also have an explanation of how to give a grid reference on each sheet.

What is a 'site'

Another area of uncertainty is what actually constitutes a 'survey site*'. I'm not surprised at confusion over this one as it often depends on the structure of the actual survey. For example, the National Otter Surveys have looked at 600m lengths of river bank centred on a specific feature, usually a bridge. This size of site was determined to reflect the density of survey sites and likelihood of finding otter signs. However, the SOG surveys are based on spot checks of specified sites, mostly bridges, and the immediate area only. Sites are typically referenced to 6 digits - see above). Because of this I would like to suggest that for our purposes anything within a 50m radius of the national grid reference constitutes a SOG site. Basically if you find evidence of otters at two locations that can be identified by two unique 6 digit grid references these can be considered as two sites. If anyone feels strongly about an alternative to this perhaps we could go through it at the next meeting.

NEXT MEETING

We have a really attractive programme for the next meeting, which will take the form of a social evening at the Victory Inn, Norton Fitzwarren. We are very fortunate in that Charlie Hamilton-James, the well-known wildlife cameraman, will show us some otters. His recent epic successes on the telly include otters in Shetland(you may remember the otter that brought a crab to shore right in front of his camera team, almost too close to film), and the Giant Otters of the Amazon. He tells me he has some new footage of the bitch and cubs that frequent the garden of his mill house in N. Somerset(well who else would have otters on his patio on a regular basis?). Peter Hurman will also have some footage of local otters, including the dramatic and successful carp hunt.

The meeting will be on **Monday October 1st, at 7.15pm for 7.30pm**. There will be a fee of **£5.25** to cover the buffet and the expenses. We hope for a good turn out, as we are very lucky to have this chance, and it is very good of Charlie to spare us his time.

Can you please let Saranne know if you will be coming so that we can book sufficient
suppers. You can return the slip to **Saranne Cessford, A**
or phone her (Leave a message clearly stating
your name, and how many will attend) or e-mail Saranne at

Name.....

I would likeplaces at the October Social evening on Monday 1st October, 2001 at the Victory Inn, Norton Fitzwarren at 7.15pm.

Return to Saranne, please.