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SOMERSET WILDLIFE TRUST OTTER GROUP

NEWSLOTTER NO3

March 98

March; the winter floods should soon abate, and then we get our best window of opportunity to get to grips with our elusive otters. The mud will be clean and soft, the summer plants won't have swamped the river banks, and we ourselves will all be full of that spirit of spring get-up-and-go which affected the Mole in 'The Wind in the Willows.'

Now is our chance to find out what is going on. Don't overlook the smaller streams and ponds on your patch; the otters are very partial to frogs at this time of year. A thorough search now will tell you who to look out for at the all important 2Day Event in May. We know that there are always one or two customers who somehow manage to elude us in May, and at the emergency repeat of the 2Day event in October we found nothing at all in the Brue Valley, although Karen's subsequent monthly checks have turned up a small but fairly static population. Where were they on the big day? And how many of their chums take a regular day off in May?

That these are not just questions of idle curiosity is shown by the continued disappointing results from the Brue. Assuming in advance of the DNA results that the regular pattern of sprainting means the same otter(s) in the same area, then there ought to be more otters out there, and it seems probable that something is wrong. Therefore we need to have as much confidence as possible in our May results, so that we can establish whether things are getting better or worse. And doing one's homework, or patchwork, in spring, is the best way to get that confidence.

GROUP MEETINGS

6TH OCTOBER

The twelfth meeting in October was attended by 24 members,(with 10 apologies). Everybody agreed that our stand in the August exhibition at Fyne Court was excellent, and Rosemary Russ and Margaret Palmer received many congratulations for it. Our guest was Francis Farr-Cox, of the Environment Agency, who was able to give us details of the horrific pollution on the Levels in August. He then gave us a fascinating talk on the life of two of the Otters' favourite foods, Crayfish and Eels.

Native English crayfish (White-clawed Crayfish)are now very rare, having been zapped by a virus carried by the recently introduced American Signal Crayfish. I hope that the new imports will hang on in there, and replace the gap they have created in the menu of our otters, but I have never seen one except on a plate, so don't think they are well established yet.

Our ubiquitous eels have been found to be not nearly as evenly and densely distributed as I had previously thought. Electrofishing shows that they have distinct preferences for certain sorts of river bed, and that some of the weirs and sluices are pretty effective obstructions to those elvers which avoid the elver nets. And now they have a further problem, an imported nematode worm which infests their swim bladders. This is a very new problem, so nobody knows what effect it will have on the return migration of the Silver Eels some 4000 miles to the Sargasso Sea. If the Eel population collapses it will surely have an effect on the otters, as eels are their easiest prey, and their most nutritious item of diet, forming about 80% of what they eat at present.

10/13th OCTOBER

A repeat of the 2Day event, organised in rather a rush, at the request of worried people at English Nature responsible for some of the areas worst affected by the dreadful natural pollution of the Tone and Parrett moors in August. We didn't hold a meeting as such, but many members turned out, and confirmed that the otters had been very little affected.

Rain up over Exmoor had made the Western end of the county impossible to check. The river Tone gave very patchy results, probably also because of the weather. This confirms that we are sensible to hold our major census in spring.

But the Brue should have been better than a blank, which is a little worrying in as much as it casts doubt on the effectiveness of the two-day method, perhaps. However Karen Coxon did locate what was presumably one of the absentees on the bottom of the R Axe, so perhaps some of the others were also away from home.

On the positive side we did turn up 12 otters, we collected some spraints for Karen's DNA work, and we found fresh work where the dog otter had recently been run over at Lopen. Anne Robinson and Paul Reddish both found increased amounts of work which indicated that the otters in the affected areas had been marginally displaced by the fish kill and pollution, but that they were still in business.

FEBRUARY

Another successful meeting, 33 present with 5 apologies. We were pleased to see several new members. Our list now has 45 people on it, which is excellent. The opportunity was taken to revise the list of names and addresses, and to confirm, and if necessary rejig the "patches". There are still some vacant territories, if we can find people to fill in the gaps in our coverage. You should by now all have received Cle's excellent minutes with the details of Who's Who, and Who's Where, and Karen Coxon's summary of her explanation of what is going on with the DNA reseaches, which was our main talk for the evening.

Basically, she is doing two overlapping bits of research, one for the Environment Agency, and one for her Doctorate. The EA is trying to compare the otters on three differing rivers by using DNA samples. The Itchen in Hampshire has a very small number of reintroduced otters, the Torridge in N. Devon has a strong natural population, and the Brue has a small, and hopefully increasing, population right on the frontier of the species' expansion.

For her Ph.D. Karen is studying the method itself, and applying it to the rivers of Somerset as her study area. Although it is a trifle disappointing that our earlier spraint collection did not produce very definite results, it has been of great value in ironing out problems in the scientific method. Recent batches of samples have had a much higher percentage of usable results, and 9 otters have already been "fingerprinted", 4 on the Tone, 1 on the Brue and 1 on the Yeo.

This method of non-intrusive study is intended to replace the more cumbersome and labour intensive system of radio tracking (which did not work very well for otters, animals which habitually travel long distances at night). To have nine animals tagged for radio-tracking would be considered a great result, so what has been achieved already has the potential to increase our knowledge of our otters enormously.

And, of course, there are all the 1998 samples, 3 biggish batches, still to be developed, so this total should increase.

FINANCES

Previously this group has existed financially on the small annual budget which Fyne Court awards to all its specialist study groups, and on the generosity of you the volunteers, who pay your own expenses as you would for any other hobby or leisure activity.

Now, thanks to Karen Coxon, we have been awarded two considerable sums of money by the Environment Agency, in recognition of all the extra work and mileage our members are doing for Karen's research, especially those who have agreed to do coordinated spraint collection monthly on the Brue at no fewer than 40 sites. The Agency recognises that this level of coverage of such a big catchment would normally cost them a small fortune in paying for a field assistant, and that it would be much slower.

The February meeting agreed that a first call on these funds should be for those who want to make expenses claims for the use of their car on these surveys. Other suggestions included paying for a speaker from away, and for setting up some display material.

The fund is not bottomless, so what has been decided is that group members may if they wish submit car expenses to Fyne Court. You may wish to submit it as a mileage claim, for all or part of your milage on Otter Group business, or just to ask for some petrol money towards the costs incurred. It is not our intention, nor will the cash stretch to it, to pay you fully for everything, but the Trust and the Environment Agency are aware that although you are all volunteers, nobody has ever jibbed at any of the recent requests for extra surveys over and above your original commitment to do your patch monthly.

But please note, that despite this generous donation, at the May Event lunch the only free alcohol will be that dispensed by Karen in her little tubes.

DEATHS

There have been fewer road deaths than in some recent years. I hope this does not indicate a shortage of candidates. The Exe catchment lost four in 1997, which could suggest that a good population shows up as a significant number of road deaths, but I hope not. Somerset lost three on the Parrett, all dogs, and one on the Isle, the same total as the Exe from a much smaller catchment. The Brue lost another two, after a bad year in 96, and the South Coast Axe a big dog from what seemed to be a very light population.

So far this year I have heard of only two casualties, a dog from the bottom of the Tone, and a bitch from the West Lyn on Exmoor, which is actually in Devon, although parts of the Lyns are ours.

OUR FIRST YEAR ON THE TONE

Russell and Sara Gomm's experiences on the Tone below Taunton.

It is now just over a year since Cle invited us to begin our recording on the R. Tone between the motorway and Knapp Bridge. At the May meeting we were persuaded to take on the stretch from Knapp to Burrowbridge. Since then we have added sites on the Huntspill as part of Karen's Brue Valley research.

I don't think we expected to see any otters, but we've been pleasantly surprised by how much evidence of their presence we have come across as our recognition and interpretation of available signs has improved over the year.

It has been interesting to read back over the notes made during the year whilst recording at the fifteen regular sites along our stretch. We were reminded of:-
How Policeman's Helmet (*Ampatiens glandulifera*) sprouted up overnight, smothering what until then had been good reliable sites so that nothing was seen for the three months of summer.

How the August and January floods provided superb opportunities for looking at footprints in the freshly deposited silt.

Our relief at realising that the August pollution of Curry Moor had apparently not been a major cause of concern for the otters.

The feelings of frustration and sadness at the news of two casualties on our stretch (one at Stathe and one at East Lyng)

The effect of the concentration of cattle, geese and swans which either made it hard to find signs or kept otters away from regular sites.

Finding a slide down a muddy bank- just like the ones in the book.

Finding a half-eaten moorhen in the shelter of a willow tree, surrounded with otter footprints.

Discovering spraints perched on top of piles of mud and earth scratched up by otters when it seemed no other "high spots" were available.

The excitement at receiving news of daytime sightings of otters from local riverbank users.

It would be nice to think of extending our area of search in future to include the Canal and tributary streams- and to look more closely at spraints to see if we could work out which of the twenty-one species of fish present in our area have been taken by the otters.

It has been an enjoyable year: what will we find in the next twelve months? Will we see an otter?

ENVIRONMENT AGENCY NEWS

The Agency has been very active recently on behalf of our Otters. Maree Whyte finally got the Dunster fencing completed to her satisfaction, and to the dissatisfaction of the badgers, who tried their hardest to wreck her efforts to make the main road safe for otters. The ghastly design of the watercourses made it hard to come up with an obviously otter-friendly solution, but at least they now have a slight chance of avoiding the heavy holiday traffic.

She also got some low level headlight reflectors put in at East Lyng. It is our responsibility to keep these free from nettles and grass. Sadly the otter which was knocked down there was trying to cross outside their area of influence, but it must be a help to have them at such a bad black spot.

We wish Maree all the best for her new life in Fife/Perthshire. Her place at the Agency has been taken by Pat Neylon, and she has already been instrumental in setting up some habitat enhancement schemes at the bleak and bare western end of the Huntspill. We congratulate Pat and Stuart Moody on the speed with which they have set up this valuable improvement.

The Agency has been as usual very vigorous in pursuit of pollutions. They have recently dealt with two on tributaries of the Tone, and righted the sewage leak on the Hillfarance Brook in under 24 hours. Their main event this year has of course been the natural pollution of the Tone and Parrett Moors in August. Massive amounts of thunder-rain fell in a series of downpours, causing a major flood of unusual height even by winter standards. But this one fell at a time when the water was very warm, and when there was a lot of vegetation about. Immediately after the cloudbursts the weather reverted to exceptional sunshine, which brewed up the floods and the grasses rather like the bottom of a heap of lawnmowings. The result was a bacterial bonanza, which turned the water black, gave off an amazing pong, and completely deoxygenated the water. The fish suffocated in thousands.

What to do? If the Agency pumped the sweltering floods off the moors into the rivers they would kill more fish; if they did not they were cooking up the specially protected grassland sites, and disenchanting the hard pressed farmers who wanted some drainage for their drainage rates. Every pump and oxygenator in the south of England was pressed into action, chemical treatments with peroxide were carried out, and in the fullness of time things got gradually better. Ignorant journalists had a good grumble at the Agency, who had prevented it from becoming more than a minor disaster. We will have to wait for the summer to see how hard the botanical interests have been hit, and how much fish life remains for our otters to prey on.

The Agency is publishing a report, for those who would like to know more. And if you should ever suspect that anything is wrong with a river, ring their 24hour emergency number, 0800 80 70 60, and get them on the job. They have the technology.

THINGS TO READ

Ask your Vet for a sight of a paper in the August 23rd edition of "Veterinary Record", on the Health Status of the otters in the south west sent in for postmortem. The Environment Agency is publishing a Report on this soon.

A real Horror Comic, only for those strong enough to take long words and disgustingly worrying details, is the E.Agency's consultative report called "Endocrine-disrupting substances in the Environment: what should be done?" The things revealed about chemical pollutants in this document will stop you taking water in your whisky for good, and put you off tea completely.

The report referred to above, on the 1997 summer pollutions, shortly to be available from the EA.

OTTER KILLING BIRD SWARMS DEATH ROOST NOT ON THE LEVEL KILLER FLOCKS DUSK ALERT

Well it's called a news letter, so a few tabloid shock horror headlines might liven it up, don't you think. And anyway it is true, or at least true enough for a tabloid. The serious point is that it highlights how hard constructive conservation can be.

Our otters have apparently abandoned the Westhay nature reserve; their path is all grown over. The reason may well be that there are no longer any fish there, probably because the spectacular winter roost of starlings in the reed beds results in such a deposition of guano that the bacteria use up all the dissolved oxygen when the water warms up in summer; therefore no fish. At times the Balance of Nature seems no more balanced than an Irish political party.

SOME EXPERIENCES OF THE EXMOOR MAMMAL RECORDER

For the past eight years I have been Mammal Recorder for the Exmoor Natural History Society. Apart from receiving recording cards from the 500 hundred members, which then involves long hours sifting out the information for an extensive report for our yearly magazine, I am heavily involved in field work, which I much prefer.

Once a month from April to November I check 90 dormouse nesting boxes in 5 different locations, weighing and sexing any inhabitants; one of the sites involves a 2mile walk each way with a good climb. Small mammal release trapping occupies more time, and last but not least my monthly otter checks on the Rivers Avill and Aller.

Regular walks across the moor also enable me to check bridges and waterways in the more remote areas; some members have now learnt what spraint looks like, and not to remove it; they send me records, and last year we had a live sighting.

So my job is quite nervewracking, even more so when replaying messages on the answer phone, because every now and then James Williams' voice booms across the room, accusing me of lacking responsibility as Mammal recorder, for allowing another sad road casualty, or not stopping the badgers from upsetting his newly fenced area at Loxhole Bridge. You can't win.

Loxhole is a problem for me in more ways than one. A lot of money has been spent here putting up an elongated plank for the otters, to try to encourage them to follow down the huge concrete flood channel, perilously balanced 15 feet up. A ladder is the only way to check this area properly. Needed for Exmoor, circus otters that will walk the plank. One reason that I took up dormice is that the nest boxes are only 5ft above the ground, and no ladder is needed.

It is also quite dangerous in another way, because of the high emotions and acrimonious feeling about hunting, which is such a part of the tradition and culture of Exmoor. A few months ago, I was accosted by a small and determined old lady accompanied by her well-covered terrier, who had the ability to glare like his owner. She asked me if I was a member of the National Trust. Had I been she said she would have set the dog on me.

I told her I was doing an otter check. She informed me no otters had been around there for years. I kept quiet and withheld the fact that I get sprains within a few feet of where she stood every month.

I think some of the sightings reported to me of the Beast of Exmoor could be an otter seen loping along in the dusk. At the moment it is all quiet on that scene.

Tina Cattley.

Many thanks to those who have contributed to this edition of Newsletter. Please all write in for no 4 , to be published in the Autumn with a summary of the 2Day event, and all the latest scandals and sensations from the riverbanks.

Remember, Cle should have had your forms in by now. And let us know if you cannot cover your patch for the May Big One.