



Apologies for the long interval since our last Bulletin in Spring 2010, I know some of you have been wondering what has been happening, so thank you for sticking with the surveying and in this edition, we have some really great news about otters in the county. Our main story is a summary of the Fifth Otter Survey of England, which Sandie Moors of the Environment Agency has summarised for us overleaf.

There have been some changes in the administration of the otter group recently. The committee consists 9 otter group members and myself as Dorset Wildlife Trust, but Gillian Hoad has had to retire from organising all the records and surveys of the group due to work commitments. We would like to thank her for all her hard work over the last few years, in getting the mounds of paperwork shipshape for us. Luckily, Sally Westhall has volunteered to help at the Brooklands office to help us out, and Debra Keen, DWT's Membership Administrator at has been transferring all your contact details onto a new and improved system, which means it will be easier for us to contact you. However, we still need someone to help out Roy Heeler with co-ordinating spotters in the Lower Frome and Purbeck area.

Twenty new otter surveyors who braved the snow to attend a training session at Honeybrook Farm at the end of November, and successfully found nice fresh spraint at Walford mill, which brings the total number of spotters in Dorset to over 70.

OTTER SIGHTINGS

Members have photographed otters on the Lower Stour, Blandford area, Wareham and Radipole in recent months, especially of mothers with cubs. Radipole Lake is apparently is having the otteriest time ever (see blog at www.rspb.org.uk/weymouthwetlandsblog)

Radipole Otter by Bob Ford/Nature Portfolio



Wareham Otter by Pete Elsdon



There is also fantastic footage and photos by Garry Prescott at <http://www.flickr.com/photos/50814175@N05/5362802983/>
<http://www.flickr.com/photos/50814175@N05/5387795824/>
<http://www.flickr.com/photos/50814175@N05/5371722375/>
<http://www.flickr.com/photos/50814175@N05/5387193437/>



Bournemouth & West Hampshire
WATER



FIFTH OTTER SURVEY OF ENGLAND 2009 – 2010

*A summary from Sandie Moors, Biodiversity Officer,
Fisheries, Recreation & Biodiversity Team, Environment Agency*

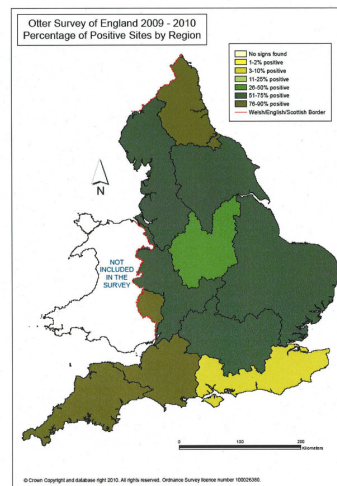
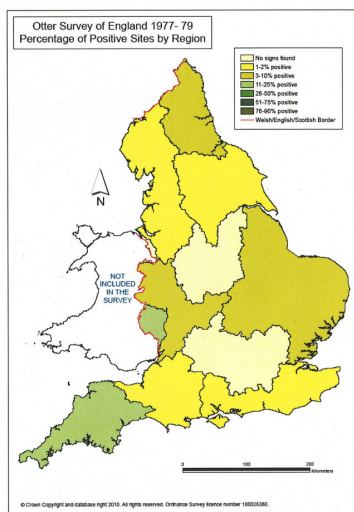
The return of the otter to most of England is one of the major conservation success stories of the last 30 years. The main reason for this increase has been the reduction in levels of toxic pesticides, but the general improvements in water quality and consequent increase in fish stocks have probably played a significant part.

Introduction

The European otter (*Lutra lutra*) is widely recognised as an emblem for nature conservation in the UK because it is a top predator and an important biological indicator of the health of our rivers and wetlands. Monitoring the status of the otter therefore gives us a valuable measure of the state of our water and wetland ecosystems. In England it is a largely nocturnal animal and is rarely observed in the wild. It is however possible to detect its presence by searching for faeces (spraints) and footprints. The otter suffered serious declines throughout most of its European range, and by the mid 1970s the UK otter population had been reduced to such an extent that it only survived in Scotland, parts of Wales and the West Country, with a few remnant populations in other parts of England.

Monitoring otters

The first otter survey of England was carried out in 1977-79 covering alternate 50km squares across England. Of the 2,940 sites surveyed in England in 1977-79, only 170 (5.8%) showed evidence of otters. This confirmed the results of the analysis of hunting records and the impression of many naturalists. The survey showed that the only significant populations of otters remaining in England were in the south west and along the Welsh border, with small and fragmented populations in East Anglia and in northern England. Otters were absent or only sparsely distributed in much of lowland and central England. Subsequent surveys and research have demonstrated that this was probably the low point of the decline which began in the late 1950s, and was primarily caused by the introduction of the persistent organochlorine pesticides dieldrin and aldrin. This latest survey reveals that recovery has continued in all but the very south-east where no signs were found in Kent or most of Sussex. Re-colonisation from strongholds in south-west and northern England and Wales has now been consolidated across much of the country and continues to drive recovery.



Environmental trends

There have been major improvements in general water quality leading to more sustainable fish populations on many rivers. Serious pollution incidents, resulting in major fish kills, have also decreased markedly since the last survey. However such incidents do still occur. There are still concerns about the level of some environmental toxins, particularly those which can accumulate through the food chain.

Other issues

One of the consequences of this recovery has been the increase in reported road deaths, and the number of accidental deaths of otters remains a cause for concern. Nearly 1,000 otters are known to have been killed on the roads since the last survey in 2000-02 and this is certainly an underestimate. Deaths in fish and crustacean traps remain a concern. Another consequence has been increased concern about predation, particularly on specimen fish in still water fisheries and rivers.

Conclusions

Recovery has been in response to three main factors, the ban on pesticides that caused extinction of otters from many parts of England in the 1960s and early 1970s, legal protection for the otter since 1978, and the significant improvement in water quality in previously fishless rivers since the 1970s. The prospects are for full recovery across England probably within the next two decades or so. This represents a major success story for pollution control, as well as investment by the water industry and efforts by landowners and river managers to improve river and riparian habitat.

Comments

Otters in England now effectively form a single population. **Of particular importance has been the expansion of range in Wessex Region (Somerset and Dorset).** This has meant that there is no longer a gap between the populations of South Wales, the lower Wye, the lower Severn, the Thames, the South West and Southern Region. The expanding Wessex population has almost certainly made a contribution to the population of the upper Thames, the tributaries of which rise close to those of the Bristol Avon which is also linked to the Kennet via the Kennet and Avon Canal, and to the western part of Southern Region. The otter population in the western end of Southern Region is now effectively part of a meta-population linked to the Wessex population.

South West regions otters are using coastal streams that are too small to have sufficient fish biomass to support an otter. Otters using such small coastal streams are probably doing most of their foraging along the coast while using small streams as a source of freshwater and lying up areas. Otters now use many of the small streams along the coast and the larger estuaries from the Severn around the south west to Southampton Water.

In England only South West region and the Wye catchments could be said to be fully occupied and at carrying capacity by this definition. Wessex and Northumbrian regions, Cumbria and the upper Severn catchments all show a high percentage of positive sites. However it is likely that in most of these areas some watercourses are still only occasionally used by otters and some further consolidation of populations will occur in the next few years.

The tolerance of otters to apparently high disturbance situations such as city centres is far higher than was thought. They appear to select low disturbance habitats where possible but at least some otters are willing to tolerate high levels of human disturbance under some circumstances. It is likely that there is a variation between individual otters in the tolerance of human disturbance.

Discussion

Wessex has seen one of the highest percentage increases in positive sites of any of the regions and catchments with 76 per cent of sites in the main survey being positive. Re-colonisation to this level is fairly recent so it is likely that, while the majority of watercourses show otter presence, the population is still below carrying capacity.

Wessex remains a key area for otters in Britain. The recovery of the otter population in Wessex region has linked the otter populations of South Wales, the lower Severn, the South West, the Thames and Southern Region. **Otters from Wessex have probably made a contribution to the rapid expansion of otter range in the upper Thames.** In the report of the 4th Otter Survey of England (Crawford, 2003) concern was expressed about the very slow re-colonisation of the Brue and Axe and about the gap between the otter populations in east Devon and west Dorset. Otters have now re-colonised the Brue and Axe and the Bristol Avon catchments and these otter populations are now contiguous with those of the lower Severn, the Kennet and upper Thames. With the re-colonisation of the Hampshire Avon catchment the otter population on the Test (Southern Region) is now contiguous with the population to the west and there is no longer a gap between the otter populations of Devon and Dorset.

The linking of otter populations is one of the most hopeful aspects of the results of this survey. **The otter populations of the Upper Thames, the Kennet and the Test and Itchen have almost certainly been augmented by otters that have crossed the watersheds from the west.** The otters of these catchments effectively now form one population. Movement of otters are now likely in both directions across the watershed which will help to maintain genetic vigour.

Finally.....

We would like to take this opportunity to thank all the DOG volunteers; we really appreciate all the effort put in by Rachel, Gillian and all the surveyors, The information gathered by DOG helps the Environment Agency look critically at the results within each catchment and identify future priorities such as habitat enhancement, water quality issues, etc. The data collected has also contributed to the results of the fifth national survey of otters. I have tried to summarise the results below but the full report can be downloaded free from the Environment Agency's website: [-http://www.environment-agency.gov.uk/homeandleisure/wildlife/110740.aspx](http://www.environment-agency.gov.uk/homeandleisure/wildlife/110740.aspx)

INTERNATIONAL OTTER SURVIVAL FUND – Volunteers required

Volunteers are needed by IOSF to take part in a survey of the diet of otters living in freshwater systems in the UK in response to the decline of eel populations. IOSF are looking to train people who can commit to collecting spraint and identifying prey items in it, and sending their data in. Free training would be given on the Isle of Skye, but volunteers would have to pay their own expenses. Please ask Rachel for further details or contact IOSF at enquiries@otter.org or telephone 01471 822487 www.otter.org

Contact for DOG matter: Rachel Janes (rivers & Wetlands Conservation Officer) on 01305 264620 or email rjanes@dorsetwildlife.org.uk

Could you receive this bulletin by email? If so please email Rachel