

RIVER OTTER ASSOCIATION

SECRETARY : ALAN KNIGHTS

COTTARSON FARM AWLISCOMBE HONITON EX14 3NR



NEWSLETTER

MARCH 2002

WAS THIS A SALMON ATTEMPTING TIPTON WEIR ?



On the 23rd October 2001, during a 60 min period of observation, 14 fish between one and six pounds were seen attempting the climb over Tipton Weir. The largest fish estimated at about 6 lbs was different from the rest. It had a distinct reddish colour whereas the others were dark grey on the back ; it was longer than the other fish and had all the characteristics of a salmon. Fish jumping weirs are always difficult to photograph and the picture is not a good one but on the basis that it looked like a salmon, was coloured like a salmon and swam like a salmon it most probably was a salmon. It was not seen to succeed in scaling the weir. Tipton Weir is difficult and one of our projects in 2002 will be to work with the Environment Agency to improve the access over the weir for the passage of migratory fish. On 25 th November in a further 60 min period of observation 25 fish between 6 ozs and 1 ½ lbs were seen attempting the weir with only one certain success. These were probably part of a shoal of sea trout observed in a pool above Tipton Bridge waiting for a spate to move upstream to spawn. On 8 December we took 45 mins of video film of fish spawning right at the top of the river at Churchinford. The fish we filmed were in the region of 8 ozs up to 1 ¼ lbs. In addition there were 2 sea trout of 3 lbs+ who were too difficult to approach with the camera in gin clear shallow water.

THE SEASON

Well it was hardly a season - more half a season. With the impact of F&MD few anglers went to the river before mid June and some even later. The continuous high water throughout the winter made many sections of the river unrecognisable with severe erosion particularly in the middle and lower reaches. The section above Tipton Bridge has particularly suffered from erosion with vast shoals of (admittedly clean) gravel in the centre of the river. One effect is that former favourite pools that have been scoured out have likely lost their population of nymphs and no longer provide a feeding station for fish. On the other hand some of these new pools seem to be attractive to sea trout who are not believed to feed whilst in fresh water. One such new pool in the middle river had a large shoal of fish from 8 ozs up to 3 lb and they seemed very happy in the scoured out pool. In spite of all the difficulties some good fishing was enjoyed. At Gosford there were some good rises and one resident stock fish of just under 3 lbs was reported. Deer Park had good fishing in the latter half of the season with experienced rods taking up to four fish in an evening. At Cottarson our total of 44 fish was average for the time fished but size was well below average with little over ¾ lb. Mature fish did not seem to return from the spawning run - we wonder whether predation had a large impact or whether in the hostile conditions of the winter they went out to sea. Certainly in the large shoal of sea trout referred to above there were numbers of quite small fish.

The lower river syndicates report a very poor year although the total catch was not that less than average. This part of the river is stocked and has a breeding family of otters who raised two cubs this year. This must have put quite a strain on stocked fish who tend to be less river wise than wild fish. The spiling between Colaton Raleigh seems to have been reasonably successful in stabilising the banks but the attempts to modify the path of the river by dredging out vast quantities of gravel has been treated with contempt by the river with vast shoals appearing in midstream. We have to learn from this experience. It cannot be good practice to loosen established gravel beds especially next to the geological fault that runs down the lower valley and immediately above the main aquifer.

SEA TROUT AND SPAWNING

We have just received the details of reported sea trout catches for 2000 as recorded on licence returns. These figures are particularly interesting as they are the first year after the opening of the fish pass over Otterton weir. The figures are :-

- For the year 2000 117
- Average 90 - 97 92

The recorded catches are likely to be understated as sea trout will be caught and returned by anglers fishing for brown trout and not holding a migratory fish licence. Figures for 2001 when available are likely to be affected by F&M restrictions but one rod on the middle river caught 11 sea trout up to 4 lbs in 2001 (all fish returned). Following the fish up the river has been very exciting this year. River levels have been low all the summer but fish can move upstream over Otterton weir in all conditions although it is the autumn spates that trigger the main runs. The two principal spates were on Oct 19 and Dec 1. Monitoring Tipton weir during this period showed 74 attempts over a total of 320 mins of observation. Fish ranged from 6 ozs up to 6 lbs with the largest fish of 6 lbs believed to be a salmon (see front page illustration). Only 3 successes were seen in the period of observation and work to improve this weir must be a priority. Other highlights were a fish of 6 - 8 lbs seen preparing a redd above Gosford, a fish of 2 ½ lbs seen at Cottarson (the first I have seen in 30 years) 3 fish of 1 - 2 lbs going over Tracey weir and 2 fish in excess of 3 lbs going over the final weir Knackers Hole.

The most exciting climax to our work over the past 10 years was to see two sea trout in excess of 3 lbs spawning at the head of the river at Churchinford. These fish in about 6 ins of water were too easily spooked to film and we did not wish to disturb them but a few yards upstream a group of fish up to about 1¼ lbs were also spawning and we have 45 mins of video of their activity.

This stretch of river at Churchinford has been given special attention with access improved by the sub weir at Knackers Hole and by SWW moving the stw outfall ½ mile downstream. This gives us a mile of perfect spawning habitat.

LOSS OF TWO SENIOR MEMBERS

We are very sorry to report the death of our president Brig. Sheppard in September. Over many years Brig Sheppard has given great support to the association including representation on a number of NRA/EA committees. He will be greatly missed.

The second loss was Gilbert Barratt who despite his disability played a full part as a member of the River Watch team and as a member of the executive committee. We are hoping that Gilberts son Trevor will continue with his fathers good work

WILDLIFE

There was some concern in the early part of the season that continuous high water may have made life difficult for wildlife on the river. With holts constantly flooded and fishing frequently impossible both otters and kingfishers retreated from the main river in the middle and upper reaches. It was not until July that some of our residents returned.

We have seen some unusual visitors this year :-

- 6 white egrets on the river at Cottarson
- A group of canada geese one evening
- A ring ouzel on 1 & 2 Nov (first I have seen in 30 years at Cottarson)
- A merganser on a rare visit

Other regular visitors seen in the river corridor this year are deer, dippers, kingfishers, green woodpecker, herons, swallows, house martins, fieldfare, hosts of wrens and wagtails, little grebe, and many other species that make up the rich tapestry of the river valley.

THE YEARS RAINFALL

The total rainfall in the seasonal year ended 30 September 2001 was 1365mm. The winter total of 998mm was the highest we have recorded in recent years but was evened out by below average summer rain. The figures are :-

- | | |
|-----------------------|------|
| • Winter (Oct - Mar) | 998 |
| • Summer (Apr - Sept) | 367 |
| • TOTAL FOR YEAR | 1365 |

OTTERS

Otters are now well established throughout the River Otter catchment. For a period after the high water levels of last winter some otters retreated to the smaller sidestreams but they have now mostly returned. At the top of the river it was not until the spawning sea trout arrived that otters returned to this stretch.

There are some problems reported. On the Tale at Escot a valuable Koi Carp was killed and there was some loss at a lake elsewhere in the catchment. In the section between Newton Poppleford and Otterton a breeding pair have been rearing a family and it seems that there has been significant predation on stock fish introduced by the angling syndicate who manage this section.

Our programme to restore a significant migratory fish run does become more urgent as the balance between prey and predators has to be achieved

CORMORANTS

After a quiet period with low clear water in the summer cormorants have returned in large numbers following very cold weather on the continent. These "foreign" birds are recognisably different from our native species and two or three birds can be seen every day moving up to the top of the river where our migratory fish are very vulnerable in clear shallow water. Birds have been seen capturing quite large fish in the section from Honiton up to the headwaters and it is a matter of concern.

CATCH AND RELEASE

We again ask members to exercise restraint on taking any migratory fish from the river. We ask for any salmon caught to be returned and only the minimum number of sea trout or school peal retained. Reports suggest that members have been very careful to return fish in 2001.

If we can maintain the spawning run and protect the spawning areas for maximum survival we should be on target from 2004 onwards to build up our migratory sea trout run to an optimum level of 1500 fish. This will provide for anglers to take a fair harvest and leave enough for predators and for spawning to sustain the future.

WORK TO IMPROVE THE RIVER

It has been another good year in our programme to restore the river. This year it has been the turn of Langford weir. We had been looking at a low budget approach either with a design we put forward or an alternative offered by the EA. Neither solution was perfect or guaranteed to be successful. After a number of meetings the EA agreed to go for the more permanent solution and at a final meeting with Chris Lawson and Rob Jones on Langford bridge we agreed to share the cost of bringing in more substantial blockstone to increase the height of the two sub weirs thus raising the final pool by 2 ft and reducing the distance on the final slope by 4 ft. Work was carried out in October just in time for the spawning run and the result has been dramatic. In past years we have seen large numbers of fish attempting to passage the weir with little success. This year we saw just two fish that swam straight through. Clearly the work has been a great success and we are well pleased with the return for our contribution of £1750.

Our thanks are due to the EA fisheries team who faced some difficult problems in very unpleasant weather. Also to George Rosewell who gave access to our heavy lorries through his field.

The cost/benefit of this work on our major weirs is out of all proportion to what is often a one off effort. If we can get our spawning fish up to the fine quality water we have at Churchinford we can expect 95% hatch rate with maximum survival restoring the necessary balance of fish to predation.

Much groundwork has been done on the work needed at Tipton weir. We made a special effort to monitor this years run and we have quite long video footage of the problem. Nigel Webber, one of the longest serving on the EA team, has been liaising with John & Eddie Sargent. We have funds set aside for our share of the cost and are very hopeful of action in 2002. A look at the picture on the front page gives a glimpse of the rewards that completion of the work on this final main weir on the river has to offer.

The pictures on the back page look back on our work of the last ten years and show just how much has been achieved in partnership with the NRA and the Environment Agency. There is still plenty to do but we are on the way.

RIVER WATER QUALITY

We have just received the data for compliance with River Quality Objectives for 2000.

Members will remember the protests we mounted when water quality targets were reduced a few years ago. We were assured that notwithstanding reduced targets the high standards in the upper river would be maintained. The reality is that even the reduced standards were not met in significant stretches of the upper river.

The R.Love, Gissage and the main river from Clapper Lane Br up to Upottery all failed to reach RE2 standard which is the minimum for a salmonid river. The stretch below OSM also failed to reach its RE2 objective. It was, of course, a very wet year which exacerbates run off from fields and puts pressure on storm overflows from the stws. Nevertheless we should expect better control from those charged with maintaining RQOs.

The performance of the main stws on the river has been mixed. Honiton has been excellent and is an example of what can be achieved. Churchinford is to be improved as the second phase of work is carried out in 2002. This will further help protect our spawning area. Ottery St Mary Town & Fluxton are a disgrace. The consents dating back before 1986 allow BOD levels of 30 mg/l and even this has not been achieved in some periods. There has been significant growth of the town with nothing done to upgrade waste disposal. This is not part of the clean up that confronts SWW.

This is work that should be done out of connection charges from new developments. Please SWW you know you can do better !

Having said this the upper river has been a delight to behold in Nov/Dec with golden gravel and gin clear water.

CAN YOU SPARE A LITTLE TIME ?

Recent deaths and anno domini have reduced the strength of our river watch team. We need a member of River Watch for Tipton area. Also for Newton Poppleford. We also need help on monitoring the weirs from Jul/Nov (particularly Oct & Nov) to record movement of sea trout upstream. We could not afford a fish counter at Otterton fish pass so we rely on visual monitoring. The main weirs are Otterton, Tipton, OSM Tracey & Langford. Can you help ?

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

It is with very mixed emotions that I write my report this year as we experienced the sad loss of two of our stalwart members. Gilbert Barratt, who had been on the committee as long as I can remember, was a very active member of the River Watch team despite having a severe handicap. His love of the river was second to none and this was shown by his unyielding support of the Association

Sadly 2001 also brought about the sad loss of Brigadier Sheppard who had been President of the Association since 1989. His steadfast determination and much needed behind the scenes work resulted in many major developments taking place. The service and dedication to the Association from both members will be sadly missed.

The onslaught of Foot and Mouth disease brought the countryside to a halt this year with devastating results to the local communities. Despair and frustration hit everyone as the impact on agriculture and tourism took hold. Pressure must now be put upon the Government to hold a full enquiry into MAFF and DEFRA's handling of the whole crisis.

One of the more positive events to happen this year was the completion of the restoration work to two of the sub pools at Langford Weir. Financially this was a much-needed joint venture with the Environment Agency; hopefully it is a partnership that can be reunited for future projects.

This now means that, subject to further work on Tipton Weir, we have got a clean run up the river from the mouth right up to the head with reports of sea trout having been seen as far as Churchinford. We now need to concentrate our efforts towards the erosion of the river banks so lets hope riparian owners, the Environment Agency and the ROA can work together to solve this problem.

Once again I must pass on my thanks to our secretary for all his hard work over this past year and also many thanks to our committee for their hard work and support. In view of my opening comments the Association is currently seeking the right candidate to take up the Presidency. Please direct enquiries towards either our secretary or myself.

RICHARD J T MARKER

AUCTION OF FISHING DAYS TO TAKE PLACE AFTER THE AGM ON 20 MARCH 2002

LOT	LOCATION	FISHING	SUGGESTED MIN BID
			£
1	DEER PARK	A DAY ON THE DEER PARK WATER	10
2	OTTERY FLY FISHERS	TWO DAY TICKETS ON THE CLUB WATERS	10
3	COMBE ESTATE WATER	ONE DAY - BELOW WESTON BRIDGE	7
4	COLAFORD SYNDICATE	A DAY ON THE PRIME UPPER BEAT	7
5	DEER PARK	A DAY ON DEER PARK WATER	10
6	OTTERY FLY FISHERS	TWO DAY TICKETS ON THE CLUB WATERS	10
7	COTTARSON FARM	ONE DAY - ALL WILD FISH	7
8	COLAFORD SYNDICATE	A DAY ON THE LOWER BEAT	7
9	RIVER TALE	A DAY ON ESCOT WATER	7
10	GOSFORD	A DAY ABOVE GOSFORD BR	7
11	DEER PARK	A DAY ON THE DEER PARK WATER	10
12	COTTARSON FARM	ONE DAY - ALL WILD FISH	7
13	A DAYS ESCORTED GRAYLING FISHING BY GARY PEARSON - R.DEVER		15

Auction will take place after the AGM. Postal bids may be made if you are unable to attend the AGM and should be sent to Alan Knights Cottarson Farm Awliscombe Honiton EX14 3NR. Successful bidders will be put in touch with riparian owners to make arrangements for their fishing.

DO NOT MISS THE AGM ON 20 MARCH - SPEAKER ON EGG BOXES FROM WCRT

FROM FISHERIES OFFICER CHRIS LAWSON

The past year has been difficult for the Devon Area Fisheries Department of the Agency which has had to weather a 40% budget cut. Several staff have been redeployed to other sections, and of those that remain, a major proportion of their time has been spent carrying out work for other Agency departments. All fisheries assistants have been stood down for the year, and in addition, there are greatly reduced monies for works on the ground.

Happily, current indications are that the budget will be partially restored in the new financial year. How this actually translates into service delivery is difficult to assess as the Agency is once more in the process of going through another major structural review, the outcome of which will not be known for several months. The long term goal of the reorganisation is to improve the way in which the Agency carries out its duties and responsibilities, so on that basis it should be good news for the river Otter.

There will also be some changes to the way in which we undertake juvenile salmonid electric fishing surveys. Historically the Otter has been surveyed every three years. From this year onwards the river will have a limited number of sites surveyed on an annual basis with a more detailed survey taking place every five years. This new programme has been developed to give rise to the most scientifically valid means (given the current level of resource) of detecting changes in fish populations. It will be interesting to see whether in the future these surveys identify any evidence of salmon spawning.

Looking forward to the forthcoming year we would hope to work once again with the ROA to arrive at a solution for improved conditions for migrating fish at the large boulder weir at Tipton St John.

Although passable at the moment under certain flows it is hoped that with some minor alterations we can greatly increase the times at which fish can successfully negotiate the structure.

CHRIS LAWSON

WELL DESERVED OBE FOR GEOFF BATEMAN

Over two decades Geoff Bateman has been one of the most consistent faces throughout all the changes that have taken place in the delivery of environmental services. His support for the river Otter has been a significant factor in our programme of restoration, in particular his support for the major project of the Otterton fish pass.

Whilst recognising the award reflects the major role Geoff played in the F&M crisis we believe the work on west country rivers alone merits the honour.

Well done Geoff ! We are delighted for you.

BLACKDOWN HILLS PROJECT

We are watching very closely suggestions that the Blackdown Hills project are considering work to remove accumulated silt from Otterhead Lakes. On various occasions when meeting with officers of the project we have voiced our concerns that silt dislodged from the lakes may damage the vitally important spawning grounds in the river immediately below the lakes and we are worried by the apparent unawareness of the problem.

MURPHYS LAW FLOURISHES

There have been two relatively minor pollution incidents on the river this year. On both occasions fail proof systems have proved ineffective and had it not been for the vigilance of our members much damage could have been caused.

The main event was on Sunday evening June 10. We were alerted by a local farmer that the river was running thick brown although there had been no rain. We traced the problem to Honiton stw which was discharging thick brown sludge into the river. A call to the Agency emergency pollution line produced a very quick response and SWW emergency team also turned out promptly. We have always been told that these unmanned stws are so tele monitored that undetected failure was impossible. Here is the explanation we received :-

- The valve on the final storage chamber failed
- Sludge was pumped into the sand filter
- The sand filter clogged and backwashed
- The sludge reservoir over filled and triggered the alarm
- The alarm failed to register at HQ !!



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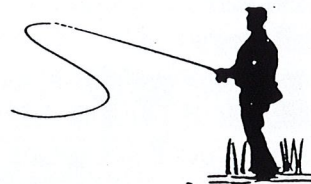
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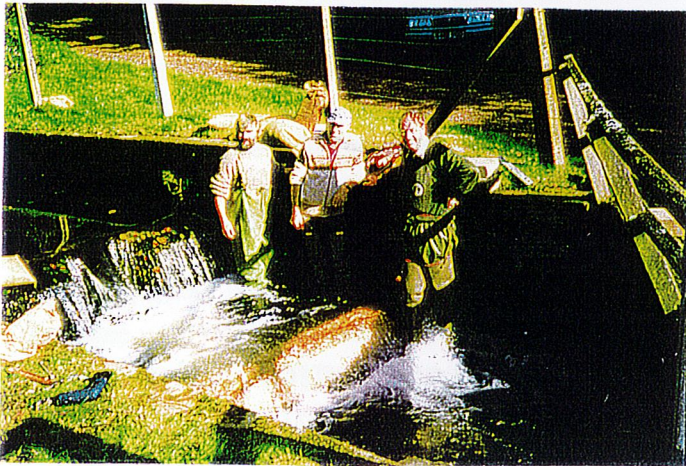
TEN YEARS WORK RESTORING THE RIVER OTTER



**1993 WEIR IMPROVEMENTS
RIVER LOVE**



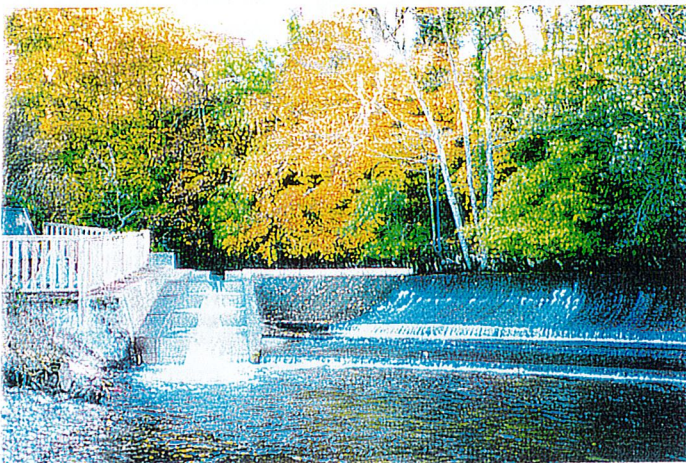
**1994 HEAD WEIR OSM
A JOINT PROJECT WITH NRA**



**1996 SUB WEIR BUILT AT KNACKERS
HOLE - SPONSORED BY COMBE ESTATE**



**1997 IMPROVEMENTS AT
TRACEY WEIR BY THE EA**



**1999 - FISH PASS OTTERTON WEIR
A JOINT PROJECT WITH THE EA**



**2001 LANGFORD WEIR
A JOINT PROJECT WITH THE EA**