

RIVER OTTER ASSOCIATION

SECRETARY : ALAN KNIGHTS MBE

COTTARSON FARM AWLISCOMBE HONITON EX14 3NR

NEWSLETTER

MARCH 2008

ONE OF OUR SALMON RETURNS TIPTON WEIR NOVEMBER 2007



Photo Iain Burns

THE DEER PARK SEASON 2007

FROM DAVID PARKER

March 15th arrived and the river fished well right from the off with seven fish caught on the first day - 5 brown trout, 1 grayling and 1 salmon parr. The largest fish was a brown trout of 1lb4ozs. On 29 March a brown trout of 1lb10ozs was caught on beat 1 which unfortunately died while being netted. When the fish was being cleaned the reason for the fishes demise soon became apparent - it had swallowed a salmon parr which it had not digested. The fish was stuck in its throat when it took a pheasant tail nymph (greedy fish).

April arrived and the river continued to fish well with fish taking various nymphs but most taking dry flies. Good hatches of march browns and hawthorn flies may have been the reason for fish coming to a dry fly so early in the season.

It was the end of April when we introduced 200 stock fish from 1 - 2lb throughout the fishery. During April 90 brown trout were caught, most being returned, 2 salmon parr and 1 grayling were also caught, the largest fish caught was just short of 2lb. Towards the end of April and the beginning of May the rainbow trout started to be caught throughout the river - another escape from Tracey Mill.

May fished very well with some very large fish being caught, a rainbow of 3lb4ozs was caught by a guest of Robin Kemp and brown trout up to 3lb and many fish of varying weights throughout the fishery. There was plenty of fly life all the way along the river with a prolonged hatch of mayfly.

The rains that arrived late in May and through June meant that the river was sometimes unfishable and a lot of mayfly escaped the jaws of the fish only to be taken by birds along the river - who would want to be a mayfly ?

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20 YEARS RESTORING THE RIVER OTTER

(see pictures on back page)

In the early 1980,s there was a perception that all was not well with the river. Stocks of wild fish were in decline with a particular dearth of juvenile trout. Fly life was scarce with few if any mayfly in many beats. What was the problem ? Was it pollution, abstraction, obstruction or perhaps all of these.

We began to examine the evidence. The first clue was an electro fishing survey at Honiton in 1978. The survey found " the structure of the trout population was peculiar with few juvenile fish" and " the population of 0+ fish could not sustain the 1+ population. This told us that either spawning or juvenile survival were part of the problem. Trout do not spawn in the main river. They use the main tributaries which in the middle river are the Gissage, Wolf and Git. The problem became obvious. The Gissage was blocked by Dragons Tooth Weir built in 1978 following the flood of 1968. The Wolf was blocked at Marles Weir. The Git was blocked by a flight of concrete steps when the By-Pass was built. The only hope for our fish was the main river but upstream migration was blocked by Tracey and Langford Weirs.

So we had to look at the upper river. The limit of migration was Royston Water but below this the upper main river, the Churchinford Stream and the Washford Stream all offered excellent spawning potential.

First we looked at Churchinford. There was a blockage at Knackers Hole where a vertical leap at the gauging weir was impassable other than in major floods. One of our first tasks was to bisect this weir which was achieved with support from Combe Estate. There was still a pollution problem with Churchinford stw discharging into the Churchinford stream.

We examined the discharge consent. The limit was for a population not exceeding 250. This limit was almost certainly exceeded. Further examination of the consent revealed that the consented point of discharge was not into the Churchinford stream at all but into the main river. We managed to negotiate with SWW that they would take the discharge downstream in the main river below Knackers Hole. We now had a section of main river and the Churchinford Stream free of effluent pollution. Our banker spawning location was established.

By the early 1990s the extent of the problems we faced were becoming apparent and work began on a comprehensive survey of the reasons for the decline of the river. In January 1992 the report was published. It covered a full review of the consented 1.4mgd of treated waste treatment discharges, source to mouth graphs of BOD, Ammonia, Nitrates, Suspended Solids and Dissolved Oxygen. Detailed observations were made of attempts by fish to overcome obstacles on the routes to spawning areas. Low flow periods below long term Q95 were recorded as well as detailed statistics from major licensed abstractions. This provided the basis for an action plan to overcome the root causes of the problems.

Pollution was clearly a major element of the decline. One of the earliest surveys on the effect of chemical impurities from stw discharges on the sexual orientation of fish was carried out on a cage of trout below Honiton stw and gave cause for concern. With the expansion of Honiton a major improvement programme at Honiton stw was implemented encompassing a number of additional features that we had sought and much improving the quality of this major discharge. Some improvements have been carried out at other stws but there is still much to do particularly at Ottery St Mary.

We now turned to abstraction. In the long drought of 1976 much of the main river almost ceased to flow causing much damage to all forms of life. In this time Wessex were still

abstracting from the headwaters at Royston Water. We examined their abstraction licence. The licence was established by the 1937 Taunton Corporation Act. When the Bill went before Parliament there was considerable opposition that water from our Devon river was being taken out of our area. We went to Taunton Records Office to examine contemporary documentation. There we discovered that the Bill was amended in Parliament, the main change was that abstraction was not permitted in the summer months. Wessex were forced to recognise this protection after we had taken counsels opinion.

The next abstraction concern was GW licences in the aquifer of the lower Otter Valley. Licences far exceeded the ability of the aquifer to deliver without environmental damage to the river. One saving feature was that abstraction was limited by the capacity of the existing boreholes. We then found that SWW were attempting to move an existing borehole without seeking a new abstraction licence. They claimed that as it was in the same NG No no application was necessary. We said that the borehole was specified precisely in the plan attached to the licence. With support of the ACA we took counsels opinion which totally supported our position and SWW had to make a new licence application enabling the River Authority to impose conditions.

It was now time to turn our attention to obstruction. With support from the River authority and their successors improvements were carried out at Langford Weir. It took several attempts to get it right but it is now passable. Next Tracey Weir was improved and fish in the main river had a passage upstream to the spawning areas.

We were now ready to tackle the main barrier Otterton Weir. This was a formidable challenge. It was the main blockage that made the Otter the only one of the 18 South West Rivers not to have a migratory fish run. Only a formal fish pass would suffice. The provisional cost estimate was £25,000. A survey was carried out and Alan Knights with Brig Sheppard went to a meeting to hear the outcome. The state of the weir was such that additional work increased the potential cost to £75,000. We almost gave up but we had come so far we had to go on. Fisheries Officer Stuart Bray gave great support. He negotiated a substantial grant from Tesco and with Geoff Bateman bringing help from the NRA the fish pass became a possibility. Before commencing Otterton Weir pool had to be cleared of fish. The haul was amazing yielding numbers of sea trout and a few salmon all of which were moved upstream. With challenging weather and many other setbacks the pass was completed and the river opened up after 100 years in December 1999. There followed improvements to Tipton Weir and we were ready for the final stage.

We took advice from West Country Rivers Trust on the best approach to restoring salmon to the river. We had already identified Churchinford as our preferred site and a site survey confirmed that conditions were ideal. WCRT provided an egg box for rearing fry from eggs and with great support from Desmond Divers the box was installed in the main river with dual supply from the Churchinford Stream. The first eggs taken from salmon stripped in the River Exe were installed in 2003 with very encouraging results leading to 2500+ fry going into both main river and the Churchinford Stream. Each year further stocks have been added including 2000 fry reared by the Environment Agency in their hatchery and in most recent years smolts have been reported in the lower river preparing to migrate to sea. Both salmon and sea trout up to 10 lbs have been seen going over Tipton Weir and the River Otter is once again a salmon and sea trout river taking its place with the other 17 rivers of the South West. It will take time for full recovery to be achieved but the ground work has been done. It is up to our successors to build on our foundations. We must never be complacent - always vigilant.

THE SPAWNING RUN 2007

As October came to an end without the customary spate and river levels very low for the autumn we became increasingly concerned for the upstream migration of spawning fish.

It was not until 19th November that the rain came and river levels rose with coloured water throughout the river. Rain on and off throughout the week maintained sufficient flow and reports from Tipton Weir are that fish made full use of the window of opportunity.

Observers at Tipton report good numbers of fish moving including both salmon and sea trout. Fish ranged from 2lb to an estimated 8lb with the majority in the 2-5lb category. These figures are consistent with salmon returning from our fry stocking having spent one year away at sea and reflects reports of smolts going out to sea in each of the last two springs. Of course many of the fish seen would have been sea trout who moved into the river on small spates in the summer. Nevertheless an experienced rod who observed the migration was confident that a number of the larger fish were salmon.

These sightings are very encouraging and justify the effort put into the egg box project.

THE EGG BOX PROJECT

We are hoping to run the egg box for one more year. Our success with 95% hatch and survival from eyed ova makes the considerable effort required worth while but with Alan Knights suffering from Anno Domini and likewise Desmond Divers at Churchinford we are going to need additional support from members to monitor and maintain the box. It takes about 6 - 8 weeks from when the eggs go into the box usually end of January or early February. The water supply has to be monitored, silt taken out of the silt drain on the box, inlet pipes upstream have to be cleared of debris and a watch maintained against frozen pipes in severe weather.

If you are able to help, for example by visiting one day a week, please let Alan Knights know. It is a very worthwhile contribution to our programme to restore salmon to the river and something to tell your grandchildren that you took part in this vital project.

Of course the programme is totally dependant on a supply of eggs!

OTTERS IN THE RIVER

We have reports of otters at various points on the river. One small family group has again been seen just below Honiton and seems to have established its territory in this section.

One effect of the return of the otters is that they seem to drive mink out of their territory which is certainly better than us having to take action against mink predation.

There is a project to monitor and eliminate mink, initially by placing artificial rafts in the river. At Cottarson we have chosen not to take this approach whilst the otters seem to be achieving nature's way of supporting indigenous species.

CORMORANTS

The unusually mild winter in 2006/7 seems to have favoured the cormorant population. In the middle river we regularly have 3 or 4 juvenile birds identified by their white underbellies. They have chosen a tall dead tree as a point where they congregate each afternoon to dry out their plumage presumably after fishing in the middle reaches.

Conservationists claim that cormorants mainly eat eels! If true this may explain the significant drop in eel populations and suggests that preservation of cormorants is inconsistent with the need to protect eel numbers.

We do see some conflict in pools where cormorants, white egrets and herons all seek to claim the territory. Cormorants seem to be the more aggressive and drive out our native herons. Perhaps we need a hard winter to maintain a balance in the predatory population

NEW TACKLE SHOP IN HONITON

Members may have already spotted that Otter Sporting Services have opened a tackle shop in Black Lion Court in Honiton. The shop carries a wide range of tackle and is also able to offer limited day ticket fishing to visitors to the area.

The shop is run by an association member and is well worth a visit to view the stock and talk about news of the season.

Talking of news do let Alan Knights know of sightings of salmon/sea trout/smolts or any other interesting news.

Chairman's Report

The annual general meeting in 2008 will be a sad and momentous occasion as it sees the official retirement of Alan Knights as our associations' secretary. Due to advancing years, health problems and increasing demands to nurse his wife Joyce at home has meant that Alan feels that he is unable to fully carry out his duties as secretary and needs to stand down

This will prove a significant loss to the association although Alan is still prepared and willing to remain as a committee member for as long as possible. The article contained within this years newsletter entitled "20 years restoring the river Otter" accurately outlines and reminds us all of the work that Alan has masterminded over his period as secretary. There is no doubt that Alan has been the driving force of the association during his time as secretary which has resulted in the river improving throughout its length, the benefits of which are being seen by the increasing numbers of migratory fish returning to the river. By way of a final compliment from the river itself to Alan's work was shown in 2007 with the best ever spawning run for both Salmon and Sea Trout.

Alan's role was always going to be difficult to fill and find a replacement. However I hope the association will feel that the current duties of Alan being split between myself as Chairman, Tim Lamb as secretary and Colin Nice as river liaison and South West Rivers Association council member will ensure that Alan's good work and that of the association can be carried forward for many years to come.

I am sure that you will all join me in wishing Alan and Joyce the best for the future.

Annual General Meeting will be on Wednesday 2nd April at The Deer Park Hotel at 7.30pm. There will be a presentation of photographs of salmon and sea trout up to 7lbs attempting Tipton Weir in the November spawning run.

The Deer Park Season contd

When the anglers could get on the river several good fish were caught. the largest brown weighing in at 2lb2ozs and many fish between 1 and 2lb being caught and in many cases released.

July arrived with the river up one minute and down the next, those anglers who did manage to fish caught fish up to 1lb8ozs. On the 1st August Neil Loomes caught a brown trout of 2lb and a sea trout of 2lb4ozs in the same session. Several sea trout were caught during August with Alex Harrison catching a very large brown trout of 2lb8ozs late in the month.

As September approached the fly life was still in abundance with plenty of sedges crane flies and many others. The largest brown was a fish of 2lb2ozs. A day ticket angler reported that he had hooked a salmon on beat 1 but on investigation it seems it was a very large sea trout but unfortunately it was lost after several minutes. By the end of September the rainbows were getting less and less. The grayling that were being caught early in the season reappeared with 2 more being caught in September giving a total of 4 for the season.

Some members of the Otter Association may not be aware that Mike Weaver has written another article on the Deer Park fishery. Mike fished the Deer Park early in May with John Dawson and Mark Izzard and twice more with his wife who was taking photographs. His article should be in Trout & Salmon in the near future.

The Deer Park fished well throughout the 2007 season with over 500 fish recorded. Those of us who are fortunate to be involved with the fishery saw a fantastic sight when the rains arrived in November, there were sea trout and salmon in good numbers leaping over the weirs on their way up stream. Long may it continue !!!

THE SEASON

With 159mm rain in May and 139mm in June there were many periods when fishing was impossible. When rods were able to fish trout were rising to the fly but hatches were often short lived with fly kept down by poor water conditions. The Mayfly season was patchy. At Cottarson we saw the fewest mayfly in recent years but in the middle and lower river the hatch seems to have been better. Sedges in the second half of the season who are usually quite prolific were very thinly spread and despite the dry weather in August and September the season was at best only average.

RAINFALL

Rainfall for the year to 30 September 2007 was 1250mm. Although undoubtedly a wet year it was not the highest with 00/01 at 1365mm. Winter level was 733mm which ensured flow throughout the summer whatever the conditions but with 517mm in the summer period the river was never short of water. The dry period at the end of the summer continued into autumn with scarcely a spate to bring fish up until mid November but a good rain then lifted river levels and fish holding in the lower and middle river were able to move up.

RAINBOWS

For the second year in succession escapee rainbow trout were being caught all the way down the river. Most fish were in the 12oz range and were particularly a problem from Honiton down to Ottery St Mary with Deer Park Water much affected. Apart from the 12oz fish a number of rainbows up to 2lb were caught being last years escapees that had grown on.

We alerted the Environment Agency to the problem and they carried out an investigation tracing the escape back to Tracey Mill at Honiton. It appears that one of the holding ponds had a gap in the protective wall below the waterline.

We hope that the problem will not recur next year. Rainbow trout are not welcome in the river. They

are aggressive in taking the best lies and threatened brown trout fry as well as our salmon fry which we have introduced into the river.

SALMON

On 25 March we planted out some 2000+ fry from our egg box at Churchinford. Covering some 2km of river the fry were well spread in first class water and should prosper. Eleven members turned out to help with distribution of the fry and conditions were good.

We have reports of salmon parr being found when electro fishing was carried out at Ottery St Mary which could be from our fry stocking higher up or could be from salmon naturally spawning in the middle river.

There were as usual reports of smolts appearing in the spring and hopefully these will return to build up our wild stock of fish. Generally we are encouraged with the progress made in restoring salmon to the river. It will take time for full restoration to be achieved but signs are good.

WILDLIFE

Swallows and House Martins have been abundant and despite very wet conditions in the nesting period seemed to raise at least one and often two families. Habitat for Sand martins has suffered from bank erosion and few have been seen in the middle river. Green, Lesser Spotted and Greater Spotted woodpeckers have all appeared as usual. Kingfishers are still to be seen throughout the river but clearly had difficulty with high coloured river conditions in the breeding season. Our Kingfishers at Cottarson only appeared to raise one family this year rather than the two they often achieve. The White Egret has now become a regular sight in the middle river with often two pairs to be seen in the river competing with our Herons for the best pools. Herons have been plentiful and enjoyed the relatively mild winter. Our regular deer at Cottarson managed to save its calf from the mowing perils which tend to be a problem. Goldfinches turned up as usual. Wrens remain plentiful all along the river. Just one glance of the Little Grebe this year.



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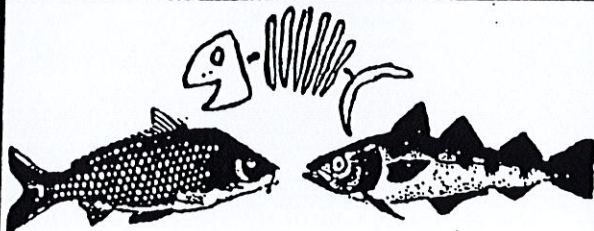
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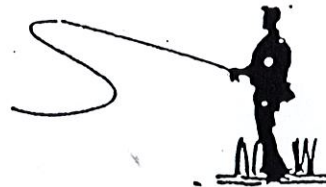
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20 YEARS RESTORING THE RIVER OTTER



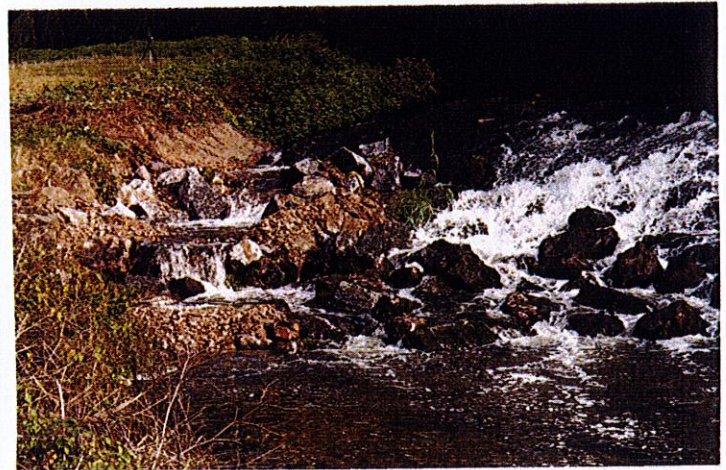
**KNACKERS HOLE
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**CONSTRUCTING
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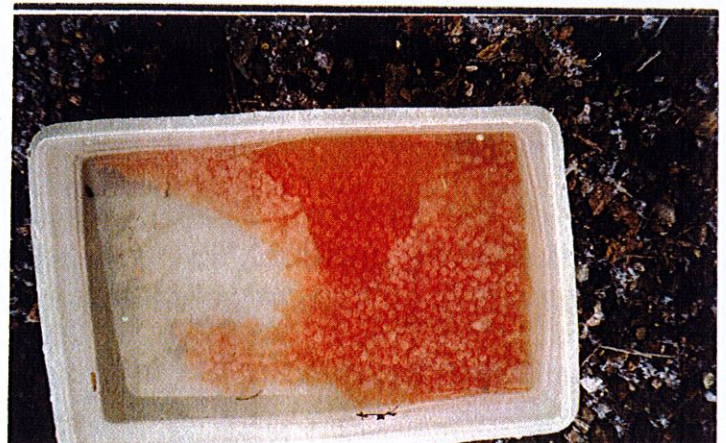
**LANGFORD WEIR
WORK IN PROGRESS**



**TIPTON WEIR
FIRST ATTEMPT**



THE EGG BOX



FIRST SALMON EGGS