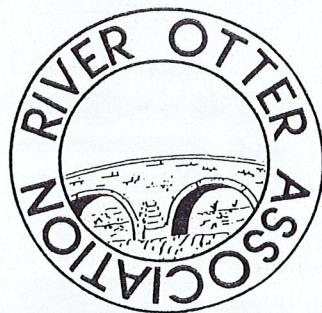


# RIVER OTTER ASSOCIATION

SECRETARY : ALAN KNIGHTS

COTTARSON FARM AWLISCOMBE HONITON EX14 3NR

NEWSLETTER



MARCH 2006

## WE COUNTED THEM ALL OUT



## AND NOW WE BEGIN TO COUNT THEM ALL BACK

The above picture shows some of the first rearing from our egg box on 18 March 2003. The eggs were stripped from the brood fish on 26 November 2002 and we took them over as eyed ova in January 2003. They remained in our egg box until 18 March when they were planted out spread over about 2km of main river from Churchinford Stream down to the junction with Watchford Stream. Fry were also placed in the Churchinford Stream. On Dec 5 2005 Desmond Divers was monitoring the spawning run at Knackers Hole gauging weir when he saw a large fish land on the sill of the weir where it flapped for a few seconds giving him a good view. Desmond, who is not a fisherman, described it as "just like the salmon in the fish shop". He described it as silver on the belly but darker on top with the beginning of a hooked jaw. The description of size suggests a fish of 3lb+ almost certainly a cock grilse fresh run up from the sea. This would match with the first possible return of our 2002 fish and as no salmon have been seen this far up the river in living memory must have come from our rearing. No other salmon have been seen but only a total of 7 hours monitoring was achieved at Knackers Hole so we have to hope that the cock fish found a mate and successfully laid down our first natural eggs in the river. The sighting was just 300m from our egg box site and we would like to think that it was one of the fry shown in the picture above that has been out to sea probably as far as Greenland and found his way back home.

## PREDATION

We have always accepted that predation is nature's way of ensuring that weak and diseased specimens are removed leaving healthy fish to survive and prosper. Such a policy did not allow for man's intervention and with sea fish stocks in decline from over fishing we are finding increased numbers of cormorants relying on river fish for their prey. We maintain a record at Cottarson of cormorant visits but this year visits have been a daily occurrence often with two or three birds and we are reduced to saying daily visits continue. We accept that cormorants eat eels as well as trout but the pattern of cormorant activity moving higher upstream as the spawning run develops and then falling back as sea trout return to the sea leaves little doubt as to their preferred food. Mink are still a problem in parts of the river and we can lend out traps to any member who feels the need. Tale Valley Trust suspected mink activity in the Tale and we have also had reports from Otterton. Herons are plentiful and take their share of fish but they are part of the river ecology and are generally accepted. Numbers are good and have benefited from the mild winters. A newer predator is the White Egret which is now a regular visitor to the middle river and has disputes with the Heron over territory. Kingfishers are plentiful and have also benefited from mild winters. Their diet is mainly minnows which seem to be plentiful throughout the river.

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## RETURNING SEA TROUT

With increasing numbers of migratory fish running the river it was inevitable that reports of sea trout returning to sea would be received. At Cottarson on 6 January a small shoal of 4 or 5 sea trout in the 2lb+ range were seen lying over a shingle bank resting and cleaning themselves after spawning higher up. They were still there the following day but then moved off. The fish looked in good condition but were thin as would be expected after depositing their

eggs. On 16 January John Vinnicombe also had a sighting of a couple of fish of a similar size.

We are interested in reports from members. Have you seen signs of spawning fish? or perhaps fish moving up river to spawn or any other activity you think is interesting? Please do report such sightings to Alan Knights who keeps a record of all such sightings.

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## OUR AGM

As you will see from the separate notice our AGM is on Wednesday 22 March at 7.30pm at the Deer Park Hotel.

Our speaker this year is **ROGER FURNISS** who is secretary of the South West Rivers Association. Roger is going to talk on the role of the SWRA in the management of the 18 major rivers in the SW region. With chairman Humphrey Wood Roger attends high level liaison meeting with the EA as well as ensuring that our voice is heard in other forums. Recent thorny problems on the agenda include "in river works" and recreational activities on our rivers including canoeing.

Both our speaker as well as your committee will be answering members questions and listening to your views. Do take advantage of this opportunity. It is only on the basis of your comments that we can formulate the policy of the Association.

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## NEW MEMBERS

Every organisation needs to recruit new members to replace those that move away or those who go to fish in their respective heavens. We are no exception. We ask members to bring along to the AGM their fishing friends or those interested in the wider ecology of the catchment. They are sure to find the evening interesting. They may wish to bid for a days fishing. The annual membership fee of £10 cannot be a burden on any budget and they may gain new friendships.

## **WILDLIFE**

We are not only interested in the protection and improvement of fish in the river but also the wide variety of wildlife making up nature's purpose of a balanced environmental ecology. Our report this year is fairly reassuring. Some of the major catchment sightings include Herons Kingfishers Little Grebe Wrens White Egret Deer Green Greater & Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers Otters Damsel Flies Dragon Flies Mayflies Dippers Sandmartins Mallard Jays Long Tailed Tits and a host of pheasants all varieties of Wagtail and others too numerous to mention. One other interesting event was a count of the moth population at Churchinford on National Moth Night 2005. Carried out by an experienced entomologist 209 moths were captured with 59 identified species. Churchinford is one of the treasured sites on our river with such rare sightings as the Water Rail and the Fairy Shrimp. Much work on the river environment is being carried out on the River Tale by the Tale Valley Trust who open the river so that others may enjoy the progress they have made.

## **TAKING STOCK**

Sometimes we feel discouraged at slow progress in reaching our objectives to restore the River Otter to its rightful place as a full migratory salmonid river, one of 18 major river systems in the SW region. Perhaps it is time to take stock of what has been achieved over the past 20 years.

If in 1990 we had said that 15 years on there would have been 150 sea trout (and possibly salmon) with fish up to 12lbs attempting Tipton Weir there is no doubt we would have been told to dream on. But this is now a reality as is the extension of the spawning run right up to the limit at Royston Water. The big leap forward was the construction of Otterton Fish Pass - we have to remember the great effort by Geoff Bateman and his team at NRA/EA who overcame so many difficulties to successfully complete the project - then the help from major sponsors - Tesco's, SWW, Wessex Water and many others. Work by the EA ground force resulted in passage improvements at Tracey Weir, Head Weir, Langford Weir and by ROA supported by Combe Estates at Knackers Hole. More recently

significant work on Tipton Weir and thanks to John Sargent for his cooperation - also ROA work on Colhayes Weir for which thanks to John Pratt.

Then there is the egg box project for which we owe much to Desmond Divers who has hosted the egg box throughout as well as the numbers of volunteers who have refurbished the box each year and assisted in the distribution of fry.

Yes it is good to take stock. Much has been achieved but there is still work to do to reach the final objective - the number one slot in the SW regional rivers.

## **THE EGG BOX PROJECT**

This project, fundamental to our river action plan, has given more frustration than any other part of our plan. We are totally dependant on other rivers to donate eggs as there is currently no viable run of salmon to collect our own brood stock. We have to record our grateful thanks to our neighbouring rivers the Axe and Exe for their fulsome and generous support. Our difficulty has been the partnership with the Environment Agency. We are told point blank that they will not allow us to share in any fish collected in the trap on the Axe - without giving any explanation! This left the Exe where our part was to obtain the consent of the riparian owners in the chosen site - a consent that was very generously given. We were then told by the Agency that it was a very poor year and they could find no fish! Readers of Trout & Salmon will have read in Mike Weavers report on the Exe with same EA reporting a significant increase in salmon caught and returned in the two week extension (75 in 2005 compared with 62 in 2004). Also it is reported that in two sweeps of the net on the River Dart 17 brood fish were captured by Agency staff. There seems a clear right and left hand problem in Exminster House.

We were led to expect a supply of eggs from "diseased or weak" fish which led us to set up our egg box. This is no mean task with 100m of pipes to flush out the tank to clean and refill with clean gravel. It takes 4 volunteers (Desmond Divers, Colin Hayball, Trevor Barratt & Alan Knights) a full hard days work in cold wet conditions. We then found that the supply of eggs projected was from our long lasting contact with Exe Valley Fisheries with little prospect.

## SPAWNING RUN 2005

Every year we say the nature of the spawning run was unique and none more so than 2005. We started monitoring Tipton Weir on 17 October but hearsay from residents who walk the river suggests that fish were seen going over Tipton Weir even earlier. We particularly wanted to cover Tipton as much as possible to see the result of the considerable improvement work that had been undertaken by the Environment Agency a little earlier in the year. River conditions were perfect in the last 3 months of the year to ensure passage of migratory fish up the river. A succession of good spates up to OTT levels interspaced with dry spells is just what fish need to reach the spawning gravels in the headwaters. Various members watched over a total of 7 hours with many additional covered on hearsay evidence. Total attempts observed were 153 of which only 8 were seen to succeed. All watchers said that they believed passage was possible but we did see so many attempts fail due to the "jet stream" power of the new channel. Only one attempt was witnessed over the left hand route. This was a fish of about 3lbs but it was not possible to see whether it got up. Generally the fish were sea trout in the 3 to 5lb range but larger fish to 8 lbs were also seen. It is possible that one or two were salmon but in the flash of a leaping fish it is difficult to be sure. It was one of the longest spread of runs we have ever seen with 8 fish still seen attempting on 2nd January. The other main monitoring was at Knackers Hole where a total of 7 hours observation saw 105 attempts with 17 successful. Apart from the one salmon most fish ranged from 8ozs to 1 ½ lbs. It seems likely that over 50 fish moved over the weir into the final stretch of 1km of main river as well as the Churchinford Stream. Trout were seen spawning in the Stream on 25 & 27 December which is as late as we have ever recorded. No sign was seen of the salmon but there are areas above Churchinford that are ideal spawning territory but are inaccessible. We briefly visited Head Weir, Tracey Weir and Langford Weir. All sites seemed passable but no fish were seen. A visit to Tipton playing fields did not show any fish spawning following work in river to correct erosion problems. We had no firm reports of the Metcombe Brook.

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## RAINFALL

Total rainfall for the year from 1 October 2004 to 30 September 2005 was measured at 859mm which was very low. The problem was the winter at 405mm which was barely enough to recharge the groundwater and springs which ensure summer minimum flows are maintained. The summer six months at 454mm was about average. The main rains came in Oct Nov & Dec 2005 with some very heavy spates taking the river well over the banks on a few occasions and giving the gravel a much needed clean after low summer flows. The rain for the first 3 months of 2005/6 (Oct Nov Dec) was 431mm thus exceeding the whole winters rainfall for the previous year.

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## THE SEASON

The season started off quite well but as the summer moved on low flows became a problem with serious weed growth making fishing near to impossible in some stretches. Deer Park lower beats and some water at Otterton were particularly affected. Stock fish at Deer Park were very hard to locate and recorded catches were low. At Cottarson there were a fair number of fish in the first half of the season but the second half was more difficult. Sea trout fishing favoured low water and catches reported seem to be average. CAMS graded the Otter as "No water available" with good reason. There seems no doubt that GW abstraction is causing loss of water into the aquifer during the summer. Consented discharges of 1.4mgd mean that dilution of waste water is becoming a serious problem causing enrichment leading to excessive weed growth and poor water quality. Discharges from the two OSM treatment works give particular cause for concern as their consents are very old and go back to times when the catchment was far less developed. If we are to meet the requirements of the Water Framework Directive some significant updating of consent is likely to be needed. Fly life was also affected by poor river bed conditions arising from the above problems. Sedges, usually prolific, were only present in small numbers as were stonefly varieties. Mayfly hatches were reasonably good and spread over a longer period than usual. Hopefully sea trout will play an increasing part in our river in the future.

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# CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

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It is unbelievable that twelve months has passed since my last report and it must be true that the older you get the quicker the years pass ! The association has had another good year with works having been completed at Tipton Weir although poor design by the Environment Agency may result in further work being required. These capital works are an ongoing commitment and further work is now required to repair Colhayes for which funds have already been committed.

These works along the river are in order to improve the spawning run and improve the conditions for the movement of migratory fish. The spawning run report for 2005 shows an excellent year with good river conditions resulting in a number of sightings at Tipton and Knackers Hole culminating in a three pound grilse being seen at Knackers Hole. This shows that the excellent work carried out by the association over recent years is bearing fruit.

However, one disappointing aspect is the lack of co-operation by the Environment Agency in supporting the egg box project. Lets hope that continuing pressure by Alan Knights on behalf of the association and the South West Rivers Association will assist in getting some support in the future. The egg box is a vital project and needs to be supported from all quarters.

At the time of writing we have reports of the driest December and January for many years but lets hope water levels return to something like normal over the forthcoming months resulting in a healthy and active river for 2006.

Thank you once again for your continued support.

**ANDREW LUXTON**

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## AUCTION OF FISHING DAYS

TO TAKE PLACE AFTER THE AGM ON 22 MARCH 2006

| LOT | LOCATION   | FISHING                              | SUGGESTED MIN BID |
|-----|--|--------------------------------------|-------------------|
|     |  |                                      | £                 |
| 1   | DEER PARK  | A DAY ON THE DEER PARK WATER         | 15                |
| 2   | OTTERY FLY FISHERS                                   | TWO DAY TICKETS ON THE CLUB WATERS   | 12                |
| 3   | COMBE ESTATE WATER                                   | ONE DAY - BELOW WESTON BRIDGE        | 10                |
| 4   | GOSFORD FISHING                                      | A DAY ON PRIME BEAT BELOW GOSFORD Br | 12                |
| 5   | COLAFORD SYNDICATE                                   | A DAY ON THE PRIME UPPER BEAT        | 12                |
| 6   | DEER PARK  | A DAY ON DEER PARK WATER             | 15                |
| 7   | GOSFORD  | WOODFORD BARTON LOWER BEAT           | 10                |
| 8   | OTTERY FLY FISHERS                                   | TWO DAY TICKETS ON THE CLUB WATERS   | 12                |
| 9   | COTTARSON FARM                                       | ONE DAY - ALL WILD FISH              | 10                |
| 10  | AN ESCORTED NIGHTS SEA TROUT FISHING WITH COLIN NICE |                                      | 20                |
| 11  | COLAFORD SYNDICATE                                   | A DAY ON THE LOWER BEAT              | 10                |
| 12  | GOSFORD  | WOODFORD BARTON UPPER BEAT           | 10                |
| 13  | DEER PARK  | A DAY ON THE DEER PARK WATER         | 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.

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**AGM ON WEDNESDAY 22 MARCH DEER PARK HOTEL WESTON HONITON 7.30 pm**  
**SPEAKER : ROGER FURNISS - Secretary of South West Rivers Assn on "THE ROLE OF**  
**THE SOUTH WEST RIVERS ASSOCIATION AND WEST COUNTRY RIVERS TRUST**  
**SUBSCRIPTIONS ARE DUE AND REMAIN AT £10 PER MEMBER**

## **WORK ON THE RIVER FOR 2005.**

Members who walk along the river from OSM to Tipton will have seen the significant effort and resources that the Environment Agency have put into attempts to improve the passage of migratory fish over Tipton Weir. Dave Brogden with Andy Locke and Gregg Armstrong, the Agency fish pass expert, met with us on site to consider the best way to overcome difficulties experienced by running fish to surmount the weir despite previous work. On the LHS blockstone route the problem was the last 12ft from the midway pool to the crest. On the RHS the difficulty was the last 12ft from the top pool to the crest. We had built a model which was based on a buffered "ladder" giving the possibility of some rest in between each stage. The Agency preference was a transverse channel on the LH pass and on the RHS a notch in the crest with a channel through the apron to the top pool. Work commenced on the improvements in Sept with rebuilding the lower pools on the RH pass and the notch on the crest with a channel to the top pool. A long transverse channel from the crest to the midway pool was constructed on the LH pass. All the work was clearly built to last our generation. The result monitored in the spawning run was disappointing as will be seen in the spawning run report. We are working on a model to fine tune the LHS channel with some buffering of the jet effect which at present seems to defeat the fish.

The other weir improvement work was at Colhayes on the Deer Park water. Here we constructed a small blockstone sub weir on one corner to allow fish a two stage ascent. We were very pleased with the result until the large flood in October moved two of the large blockstones. We hope to carry out repairs this year.

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### **KNACKERS HOLE**

To those who have never been there it sounds mysterious and intriguing. Having been there very many times it still retains that air of mystery hinting of a dark history back over the ages. For the river Otter it is of significant importance worth recording for future generations. Let us start with the 1937 Taunton Corporation Act. In 1937 Taunton was short of water not only for the town but for the signals station up on the hill. The Act sought consent to abstract water from the River Otter at Royston Water. There was great concern that our Devon water was to be taken over the hill to supply Somerset and a number of concessions were extracted in the committee stage to protect our interests. Among the conditions were minimum residual flows at two locations. One was at Knackers hole where a gauging weir was built to record flows (see picture on back page). The weir was so constructed that the vertical height made it effectively the limit of spawning migration. In 1996 we built a sub weir allowing fish to continue upstream to the weir at Royston Water. Below the weir the river passes through a culvert consisting of two concrete pipes under a concrete ford for a minor lane. In April 2004 we found one of the two pipes blocked by debris and the other was partially collapsed leaving the road without support on the downstream side (see picture on back page). The collapse was reported to the EA both on H&S grounds and obstruction to the passage of migratory fish. Despite promises by Somerset Highways to carry out repairs nothing had been done by October 2005 with steady deterioration of the condition. In October 2005 both culverts were blocked and the river was flowing over the road in a thin stream impassable to fish. The blockage was partially cleared with the result that some fish have got through (see spawning run report). It is this stretch of river that we have identified as the most important spawning area for the whole river. It also houses our egg box. So that we have a pollution free habitat for the fry SWW moved the waste water treatment outfall for Churchinford STW to 30m below Knackers Hole. Pollution in this stretch would effectively be the same as a major fish kill lower down the river. The EA are currently addressing farm run off pollution into the Churchinford Stream but otherwise this section of the river is pristine clear spring water that always maintains its flow in the driest of summers. This is just a taste of the story of Knackers Hole. Still intrigued? Do go to look for yourself.



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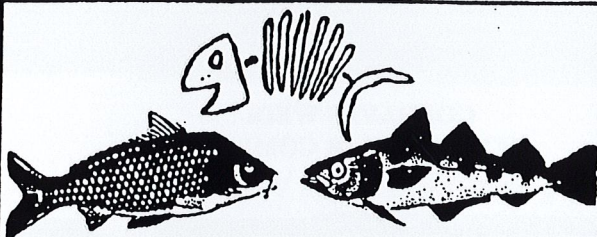
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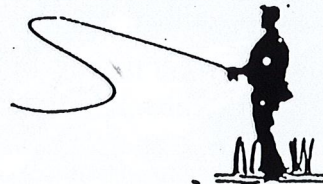
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# RIVER NEWS FOR 2005



**KNACKERS HOLE  
GAUGING WEIR OCT 2005**



**KNACKERS HOLE  
COLLAPSED CULVERT**



**COLHAYES WEIR  
WORK IN PROGRESS**



**COLHAYES WEIR  
NEW SUB WEIR COMPLETED**



**TIPTON WEIR  
NEW CHANNEL LHS PASS**



**OTTERTON WEIR  
MAIN WEIR DRIED OUT 2005**