

RIVER OTTER ASSOCIATION

SECRETARY : ALAN KNIGHTS

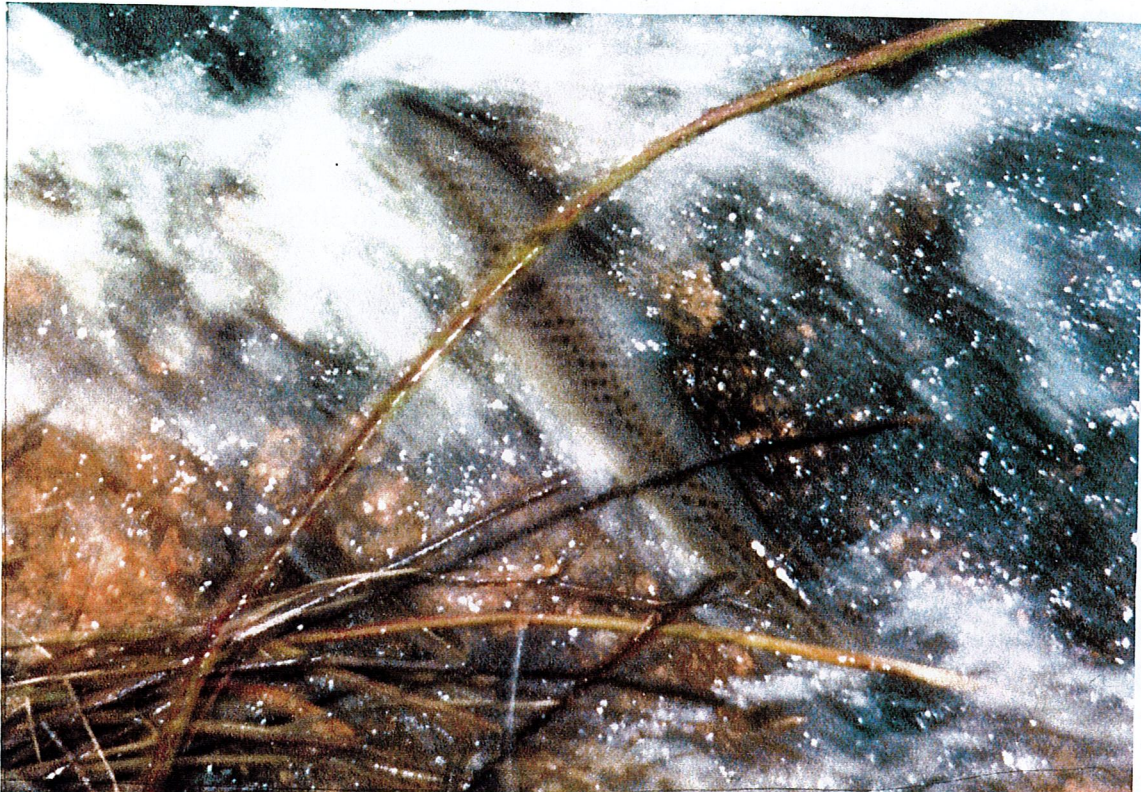


COTTARSON FARM AWLISCOMBE HONITON EX14 3NR

NEWSLETTER

MARCH 2004

SALMON AND SEA TROUT ARE BACK IN THE RIVER



The above picture taken by Colin Nice in October 2003 shows a fine sea trout on his way up the right hand "pass" up Tipton Weir. Despite being at the end of the season the fish is in splendid condition and a fine tribute to all our work over the past fifteen years to restore migratory fish throughout the river Otter system. It was in December 1999 that Otterton fish pass was opened once again giving fish access to the middle and upper river. Despite the extreme low flows throughout the summer of 2003 our fish were waiting for the first spate and the result can be seen from the report on the spawning run. We have more to do to improve Tipton Weir on the left hand "pass" but plans are in hand to carry out this work in 2004. Sea trout are noted for moving up in lowest river conditions but Tipton Weir needs at least a moderate spate to allow fish to negotiate the crest. Licence returns for 2002 show that the recorded sea trout catches for the year were 165. As some trout licence holders are also likely to have hooked sea trout the total catch is likely to be close to 200. What is particularly pleasing is that over 80% were returned. Even more exciting is the capture of a salmon recorded in the 2002 licence returns. This fish weighed 11 lbs and was caught on a fly on 29 August 2002. Again the angler put conservation first and the fish was returned to provide our stock for future generations. Please do let us know of any outstanding catches in the forthcoming year. You are reminded that a full migratory fish licence is needed if you fish for salmon or sea trout.

THE SEASON

The season started slowly but fly hatches soon developed and into June there were reasonable hatches of mayfly and a few BWOs and smaller olives. Catches were up to average on the middle and upper stretches but fishing was slow on the lower reaches.

Deer Park water fished well in early summer with plenty of fish two pounds+. By late July the river had fallen to very low levels in spite of a brief rainfall and thereafter it became a question of hanging on waiting for rain which never came.

Whilst river levels were absolute minimum flow continued at just sufficient to maintain oxygen levels. Fishing effort however ground to a halt as fish became very difficult to approach in shallow gin clear water.

Sea trout fishing in the middle and lower reaches fared better. It is unlikely that last years record catches will be repeated but most anglers willing to fish after dark were rewarded with sea trout from 12 ozs up to 5 lbs.

Fishing was particularly difficult in the lower sections where continuing sunshine and high temperatures brought out large numbers of visitors with picnics and bar-b-ques on the banks, swimming in the river and dogs cooling off in the water. In August and September fishing became almost impossible.

In summary the season was not outstanding, more a case of hanging on for better conditions next year.

WEST COUNTRY RIVERS TRUST

It was ten years that a few of us put up £500 each to form the initial capital of WCRT. We were hopeful that it would provide a base for research and river based work to complement the efforts of all the river based constituents of the South West Rivers Association. We could not have foreseen the impact that this acorn would grow into on the regional, national and international scene. Having established a hugely successful format in the West Country Arlin Rickard is now building a National association of River Trusts that promises to

cover the whole of the Country. Simon Evans is moving from WCRT to the Wye Association spreading the expertise. David Haines will take over as Director of WCRT.

The spread of river trusts country wide together with individual river associations such as ROA is growing into a credible strategy which will have the capacity to take over management of our rivers as was proposed to the Fisheries Review Group.

RAINFALL

Firstly the facts. Rainfall for the year from 1 October 2002 to 30 September 2003 was :-

	mm
Winter (Oct 1 - Mar 31)	871
Summer (Apr 1 - Sep 30)	270

Total for year	1141

This rainfall is measured at Honiton at River level. We take the Oct - Sept year as this includes one full winter and the following full summer. A calendar year takes half of one winter half of another and one summer.

The total of 1141mm is average for the past 10 years. The winter was very wet and provides the basis of our summer flow. The summer was the driest since 1990 when summer rainfall was also 270mm. It is only when a dry winter precedes a dry summer that we have extreme flow problems on the River Otter

Our salvation is twofold. Firstly the hills above the Otter Valley are capped with green sand which absorbs large reserves of water for release in the dry season. Secondly we are fortunate to have a significant wetland area at Churchinford and above that maintains flow in dry summers.

Normally our reserves provide flow up to the end of July or early August. With the very high winter rainfall in Oct to Mar this last year the springs ran through to September.

Where we do have a problem is where there is a very dry winter as happened in 1976. So far this winter up to Dec has produced 288mm and Jan looks like making a fair contribution so with luck we should not run short in 2004.

SEA TROUT

Rod returns for 2002 have just been published by the Environment Agency showing the rod catch of sea trout in our river to be the highest for over 50 years. The figures showing averages back to 1950 and individual catches for 2000/2002 are as follows :-

1950's average	38
1960's average	76
1970's average	47
1980's average	52
1990's average (to 97)	92
2000	117
2001	74
2002	165

What is particularly pleasing is that over 80% of the 02 catch was released. We thank all those who returned sea trout and ask that as many as possible continue to be released until our stocks have built up. We are particularly anxious that fish over 5 lb are returned to spawn for future generations to enjoy.

SO WHO CAUGHT THE SALMON

Members holding migratory fish licences have been intrigued to see from the rod returns for 2002 that one salmon is recorded as having been caught in the River Otter.

We have been able to obtain a little further information on this historic event. The fish was caught on 29 August 2002 by a local angler. It weighed 11 lbs and was caught on a fly. The fish was returned to the river and hopefully was one of the large fish seen attempting Tipton Weir in Oct/Nov. Our congratulations to the lucky angler and thanks for returning such a fine fish.

MIKE BROWN

At the time of writing we are very pleased to report that Mike has shown steady improvement in his health over the year. Our best wishes to him for continued improvement during 2004.

WILDLIFE

Generally our wildlife report is an optimistic one. We had 18 herons on the display field in February 2003. Since then there has been a bit of a battle between white egrets and herons for the favourite pools generally with the egrets coming out as victors. To even matters up one of our many buzzards was seen making a meal out of a white egret on the banks of the river.

Otters started off well in all reaches but as river levels dropped in the summer otters were forced to move out from the middle section to find better conditions elsewhere. At the very top and in the lower reaches they seemed to remain.

Kingfishers were plentiful all season. Dippers in most locations but a fragile population. The little grebe, one of our shyest birds, was seen in January. Another possible water vole sighting was encouraging also a woodcock and a few snipe.

Cormorants were persistent early in the year until water levels were too low for them to operate. Mallard and wrens were plentiful. All three woodpeckers (green, lesser and greater) were seen. Occasional deer in the river pastures and a few mink.

POLLUTION

We continue to be worried by very dirty water in the Churchinford Stream following heavy rainfall. It seems to come from building work on barn conversions close to the village and hopefully will cease when the building work is completed. Our concern is greater as this is the area we have identified for our salmon egg box project and we need the purist of water.

Foaming effluent from Honiton waste water treatment works is giving concern. It apparently arises from a chemical element from an industrial discharge which is difficult to neutralise. Morley Williams of SWW is responsible for industrial effluent and is working to overcome the problem. Effluent from OSM Town and Fluxton waste water treatment works also give us concern. The total consented volumes are 476 thousand gpd and with the growth of OSM must be on the limit.

WORK ON THE RIVER

As can be seen from the 2003 spawning run report we continue to be concerned on the difficulties experienced by running fish on the new LH route up Tipton Weir. This route is particularly attractive to larger fish (up to 10 lbs) and they regularly reach the excellent half way pool. The problem is the 10 ft leap over the sill from the pool. We have not seen one fish make the ascent notwithstanding repeated attempts.

An attempt was made in September to use sandbags filled with cement and ballast to seal the pool and improve the depth. Andy Locke supported by Nigel Webber and Rob Jones worked very hard over two days draining down the pool and sealing the leaks and the pool is very good. Unfortunately the height is only marginally better and the problem remains. We have now built a model of the weir and are working on plans to build a ladder from the pool to the crest. If you have seen the problem and have any suggestions for a solution Alan Knights would be very grateful for your help.

Some progress has been made on plans to improve Marles Weir on the river Wolf. The Environment Agency have assessed the problem and see the way forward as a fairly major refurbishment of the weir to make it fish friendly. When this work is completed another mid river spawning stream will be available for our migratory fish.

There is some minor work we hope to consider in 2004 subject to funds. Firstly there is a weir at Colhayes on the Deer Park water that needs some minor work to improve passage. Secondly there is a minor obstruction on the river Wolf that needs attention.

If you know of other problems obstructing passage of spawning fish do please let the committee know.

EROSION

The massive erosion above Tipton Bridge is a classic example of the failure to adopt a "stitch in time" policy. In the old days of the Devon River Authority reports show continuous action to remove shoals, clear obstructions and maintain flood banks. At Tipton what started as a small shoal causing some bank erosion has become a

major realignment of the river threatening playing fields on one side and gardens on the other. If only minor repair had been carried out a few years ago the huge problem we now face would not have arisen.

The Environment Agency have commissioned a report on the present situation and at this time we have not seen any conclusions.

THE 2003 SPAWNING RUN

When it got to the end of October and there had been no significant spate for the whole season all hopes of running fish began to fade. Fish can get over the Otterton fish pass in low conditions but Tipton Weir and above require spate conditions. At last in the first week of November rain came and immediately fish were seen at Tipton. A fairly steady stream moved over the RH pass but many of the larger fish became trapped in the half way pool on the new LH route. In 5 ¼ hrs observation at Tipton Weir between Oct 30 and Dec 2 159 attempts were seen from fish ranging from 12 ozs to 10 lbs. Of these 28 were seen to succeed.

A nice fish estimated at 4 lbs was seen negotiating Metcombe Brook as well as two smaller fish. Fish were seen at Tracey Weir, Langford Weir and Knackers Hole. At Knackers Hole only very small fish were seen this year and it seems in common with other rivers fish experienced difficulties in reaching the upper main river and tributaries.

There is one report of a large fish heard under Tipton Bridge and from catch reports it seems that the area from Tipton down to Newton Poppleford has been the main holding area.

On the whole some encouragement but we have to hope for earlier spates in 2004 to bring fish upstream.

RIVER WATCH

We still need more members to help with river watch on many sections of the river. Some of the sections not adequately covered are Deer Park, Ottery St Mary, Upottery and above. If you can help please contact Alan Knights.

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

Sadly I have to report at this AGM I will be stepping down as your Chairman. I have enjoyed my time as your Chairman. Starting back in 1989 when I was asked to join the committee as Deputy Chairman this was the same year as the National Rivers Authority was formed. The next year I was elected Chairman.

There have been many changes not only on the river but behind the scenes as well over the years. With the new NRA we had some very tough meetings about many issues mainly water quality and abstraction. My first year 1990 was the year the river watch scheme started. In 91 the Catchment Action Plan started, a lot of planning and not much action. I am sure there were many reports before but in 92 I saw my first, The Halcrow Report. This was a report commissioned by the NRA into water resources requirements in the South West. When they realised this might have a detrimental effect on our rivers they commissioned the Atkins Report, just another of the many reports produced. In 95 we had a visit from Angela Browning to see first hand the problems we were having on the river. In 96 we saw the NRA consumed by the Environment Agency and at the same time we had to fight SWW from moving their boreholes without consent. The fish pass at Otterton was completed in 1999. Last winter saw the bequest left by Gilbert Barratt used to start the eggbox project, which hopefully we will reap the rewards in a few years time.

A lot has happened over the last fourteen years, too much to mention it here, this is just a brief summary but credit must go to the committee for all their efforts. The faces have changed over the years but all have done their bit to help. None more so than Alan Knights who came on to the committee the same year as I did. I must specially thank Alan for all his hard work and guidance he has given me. As I write we still do not have a replacement Chairman so if any of our members wish to come and help please speak to Alan or me.

RICHARD J T MARKER

AUCTION OF FISHING DAYS

TO TAKE PLACE AFTER THE AGM ON 24 MARCH 2004

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	10
3	COMBE ESTATE WATER	ONE DAY - BELOW WESTON BRIDGE	10
4	AN ESCORTED NIGHTS SEA TROUT FISHING WITH COLIN NICE		20
5	COLAFORD SYNDICATE	A DAY ON THE PRIME UPPER BEAT	10
6	DEER PARK	A DAY ON DEER PARK WATER	15
7	OTTERY FLY FISHERS	TWO DAY TICKETS ON THE CLUB WATERS	10
8	COTTARSON FARM	ONE DAY - ALL WILD FISH	10
9	AN ESCORTED NIGHTS SEA TROUT FISHING WITH COLIN NICE		20
10	COLAFORD SYNDICATE	A DAY ON THE LOWER BEAT	10
11	RIVER TALE	A DAY ON ESCOT WATER	10
12	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.

AGM ON WEDNESDAY 24 MARCH DEER PARK HOTEL WESTON HONITON 7.30 pm

FROM DAVE BROGEN - ENVIRONMENT AGENCY

May I congratulate the ROA on the success of the eggbox scheme. We are hoping to add to this by contributing 2000 fry for release in the Otter. These come from the successful project that we are undertaking on the Axe for restocking of salmon.

Unfortunately we did not manage to undertake the improvements to Marles Weir this year but I am confident that these will be achieved in 2004. I have secured in principle agreement to the scheme but we now need to look at the fine detail, starting with a structural survey of the weir prior to commencing works at improving fish passage. In addition to this I have submitted bids for works at a couple of other weirs within the catchment, but these will need to be assessed against other schemes nationally and so it may be some time before we hear whether they have been successful

I am pleased to say that Brian Netherway has rejoined our ranks as a fishery assistant and so members should see him out and about, please raise any concerns with him if you wish. Environment Officers have been working hard on pollution prevention within the catchment and on fish pass improvements. At present we are working on an oil storage campaign in Otterton for domestic heating, which will result in improvements that should protect surface and groundwaters.

Building on from my section in last years newsletter I would welcome comment from members on how they see the Agency performing and what we can do better. Finally I would like to remind people of the Agency pollution hotline 0800 807060 and to let us know of any concerns that you may have as soon as you see them so that we can act quickly to resolve problems and hence minimise impact.

OUR EGGBOX PROJECT

On the back page you will see a picture of some of the fry reared from eggs taken from donor fish from the river Exe. As you will see these fry were in excellent condition when taken from the rearing box on 18 March 2003. The eggs were stripped on 26 November 2002 and taken as eyed ova on 6 January 2003. All seemed to hatch with negligible casualties and we were very pleased with this first years exercise.

The fry were planted out into the main river from Royston Water down to the junction with the Watchford Stream, into the Churchinford Stream and the Watchford Stream. We also put a few into the R Love and R Wolf so as to spread the distribution into the most favourable water. These sites are potentially the prime spawning areas in our river consisting of gravel riffles interspaced with deep pools up to 3 or 4 feet deep.

For 2004 we had difficulty in obtaining eggs. The very dry summer left few fish managing to reach the higher spawning grounds on the Exe and the Exe Association were unable to strip any fish. We have been very fortunate to be offered fry from the R Axe and we hope to receive these in Aug/Sep.

SUPPORT FOR OUR RIVER

As the present generation of our committee grow older there is a growing need for younger members to take over some of the responsibility of management of the Association. Richard Marker has given 14 years service as chairman and wishes to stand down this year. Your secretary has fulfilled the role of chief executive officer and we need to spread the load a little down the line.

Perhaps we can divide the work into :-

- Work on river improvement
- Membership secretary
- Secretarial and minutes
- Representation on SWRA council

It is immensely rewarding work and great progress has been made over the past 15 years. We are about to see the Otter return to its rightful heritage as a full migratory salmonid river along with the other 17 rivers in the SW region.

Do you think you could help in one of these areas? John Palmer, our treasurer, would also like some back up. Is this something you would like to help with. Another area is the considerable history in reports, video film, photographs and memorabilia accumulated by our secretary.



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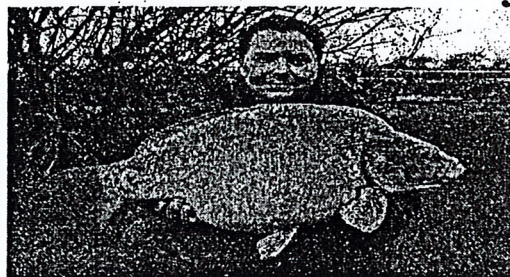
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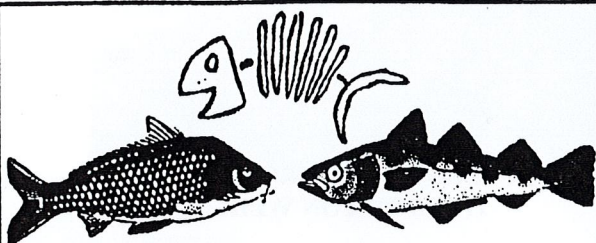
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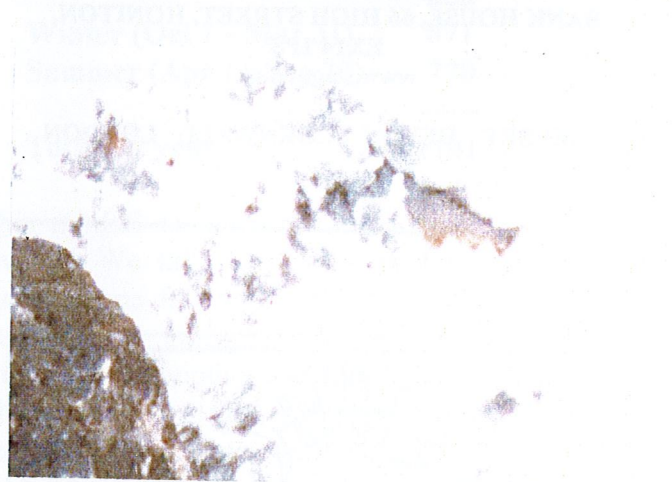
**SALMON FRY
FOUR MONTHS ON**



**ANDY LOCKE CLIVE SPILLER
DES DIVERS ROB JONES JOHN PALMER**



**DISTRIBUTING FRY
MARCH 2003**



**A GOOD SEA TROUT
FAILS TIPTON WEIR**



**SALMON FRY
FROM OUR EGG BOX MARCH 2003**



**WORK ON MIDWAY POOL
TIPTON SEPTEMBER 2003**