Children’s Otter Discovery Pack now available (see page 18)
HOLIDAYS

As I write, the sun is shining over Broadford Bay, the sky is blue and there is just a wisp of cloud. This morning as we walked the dog, an otter was fishing off Broadford pier in the still calm water. This is the reality of what Skye can be like – although I have to admit that over the winter the number of days like this have been limited! But when it is like this there is simply nowhere better in the world.

Where else can you have mountains rising out of the sea with eagles soaring over them, rocky shores with otters playing and foraging in the sea (between four and six have regularly been seen together this winter), dramatic landslips with alpine flowers and ring ouzel, basking sharks, whales and dolphins you may spot from the shore, and the chance to walk all day without spotting another human being?

Places are still available on some of our trips but bookings are coming in quickly, so if you would like to join us this summer to experience some of this for yourself get in touch and reserve a place with us. Courses available are “Become an Otter Detective”, “Wildlife & Heritage of Skye & Raasay”, and an Otter Survey of North Uist. Further information including dates and prices are available on-line at www.otter.org/holidays.html or give us a ring to find out more.
As you know, we have been concerned for some time about the barbaric use of snares in our countryside. These devices are not necessarily set to catch otters but they are totally indiscriminate and will basically catch any animal (wild or domestic).

The UK is one of only five EU countries which still permit snaring. The others are Ireland, France, Spain and Belgium, but these countries have stringent regulations governing their use, which we do not have.

In the last Newsletter we told you about Ian Hudghton MEP who has taken the snare issue to the European Parliament. Now the Scottish Executive has published a Consultation Document seeking views on whether they should be banned altogether or whether there should be stricter regulations for their use in Scotland. The Document can be found on www.scotland.gov.uk/consultations and responses have to be submitted to the Executive by 28 February 2007.

This follows on from the Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004 which brought in new measures to improve the regulation of snaring in Scotland. These measures will have helped but the only way we can stop this needless suffering not just to otters, but to all wildlife and even domestic animals, is by a total ban.

We have also been working with the League Against Cruel Sports and they have contacted us to ask for people to sign a petition on the Prime Minister’s new e-petitions website. All you have to do is go to http://petitions.pm.gov.uk/Snares/ You have until 21 November 2007 to do this, so please encourage your friends to do the same. The more people who sign this, the sooner we can stop the use of snares throughout the UK. PLEASE HELP – YOUR SIGNATURE COUNTS.

Scotland is making a start and hopefully the remaining countries in the EU will soon follow.
THE OTTER – AMBASSADOR OF PEACE

Last October, Jim Conroy, our scientific adviser, went to Korea to visit the location for the Otter Colloquium to be held in October this year. An excerpt of his report for the IUCN Otter Specialist Group is printed here:

Hwacheon county lies in the north east of the country. It is close to the border with North Korea, the Demilitarised Zone (DMZ) being about ½ hour from the city itself. The countryside is very beautiful – a land of lakes, mountains and woodlands.

Hwacheon city and county play a leading role in efforts to achieve peace, reconciliation and harmony with their North Korean neighbours.

Such is the importance placed on the otter, it has been declared the Ambassador of Peace for the country. This important role for the species is reflected in the work of Professor Han and his colleagues. They have instigated the DMZ Otter Project – an attempt to bring together scientists in both North and South Korea in a joint study in monitoring the otter. This is currently one of the only species which, by travelling along the river, can cross the border between the two countries.

As part of the plans to foster peace with North Korea, the country has set aside an area on Lake Paroho, the scene of some of the fiercest fighting in the Korean War, as a peace park. The Peace Dam has already been constructed and also the Peace Bell, which is made of shells from the War. There are also plans to create peace sculptures from tanks and/or other weapons.

While in Korea, the county inaugurated the DMZ Society, the aim of which is to foster peace. Because of the role the otter is playing in this, as Chair of the IUCN Otter Specialists Group, I was honoured to be asked to be one of the founding signatories of the Society.
I am sure that if you come to the Colloquium you will leave with a memory of a well-organised meeting and a land of friendly people, temples, lakes and mountains, as well as a sense of history – plus, of course, otters!

If you wish to find out more about the Colloquium go to www.otter2007.org
OTTER ADAPTATIONS: HOW DO OTTERS REMAIN SLEEK AND WARM?

We are all aware how well adapted otters are to their semi-aquatic lifestyle (using both the water and land). They have webbed feet to help them to swim; they are torpedo-shaped for streamlining; they don’t have a heavy fat layer which would make running on land difficult; and they have wonderful fur which keeps them warm. Their fur is not only incredibly thick but has two layers – an outer waterproof layer and an inner warm downy layer. However research at the University of Pennsylvania has revealed that this fur is even more wonderfully adapted to keep the animal warm and dry. The following is taken from an article on the internet from the University of Pennsylvania – read on and be amazed!

Otters cavorting in the water is a scene with which we’re all familiar. Yet, unlike many other mammals that spend a considerable amount of time in the water – polar bears, seals, dolphins, and whales – river otters do not have a thick layer of body fat to keep warm. They rely, instead, on a few unique adaptations; namely, their fur and the densely packed layer of specially adapted underhairs.

Using scanning electron microscopy and polarizing light microscopy, Dr John Weisel, Professor of Cell and Developmental Biology at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine, and colleagues, examined the structure of these hairs for clues to their exceptional insulation abilities. He found that the cuticle surface structure of the underhairs and base of the less-abundant guard hairs are distinctively shaped to interlock, with wedge-shaped fins or petals fitting into wedge-shaped grooves between fins of adjacent hairs.
Schematics of the most common form of packing of river otter underhairs, showing how hairs interlock. A: Individual hair. B: Two adjacent hairs. C: Two hairs with fins fitting into grooves. D: Top view of two hairs. E: Cross section of underhair packing.

Most hair from animals has a distinctive pattern, which is how we can distinguish one species from another,” says Dr Weisel. “But otter hair is so different that it caught my attention.” The fins of one hair loosely insert into the grooves between fins of an adjacent hair, thus permitting the hairs to form a web-like pattern that keeps water from the otter’s skin and decreases heat loss. Also, the grooves between fins trap air bubbles, which help increase the thermal insulation of the otter’s coat. Indeed, biologists have observed otters actively blowing air bubbles into their fur while grooming, and their energetic rolling catches air in their fur. “The air insulates like a down jacket,” explains Weisel.

A common otter behaviour, next to their playfulness, is their constant grooming. This behaviour is another important aspect of an otter’s heat-sparing abilities. In addition to the interlocking structure of the underhairs, these hairs are coated with a thin layer of body oil from the otter’s sebaceous glands, thus providing another barrier to water.

The fins of the underhairs are also aligned away from the body, which is consistent with the direction in which otters run their paws through their hair during this self-grooming, thereby ensuring that their claws do not get caught on the fin-like projections.

*University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine website*
HOPES FOR THE RETURN OF OTTERS TO URBAN RIVERS

Here are three instances of otters re-appearing in urban areas in England:

**Otter watch in the heart of Winchester:** New automatic cameras, triggered by movement sensors, were installed at the National Trust’s Winchester City Mill in September 2006 with the specific aim to record otters known to be passing through the mill. Cameras had been tried successfully at this location on the River Itchen some years ago, but these were removed and there has been a gap of at least 6 years when no filming has been possible.

Introduced by the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust in partnership with the Environment Agency, the new cameras (3 in total) were soon in action recording otters as they passed through, mostly in the hours of darkness although early visitors are often filmed between 5pm and 7pm. During the month of October, no fewer than 32 sightings were made, followed by similar numbers in November and December.

National Trust volunteer miller Chris D’Arcy, and his son Robin have taken responsibility for patiently editing the recordings into continuous video loops for visitors to the mill to watch and another volunteer, Andy Crichton, is producing charts of the sightings and a supporting display in the restored mill.

The National Trust’s Visitor Services Co-ordinator, Bob Goodwin, reports that “Visitors to the mill are fascinated by this constant otter watch and the frequency with which otters visit such a busy city. The video we can now show, with its captioned film clips, is a real favourite with people of all ages”. The mill will be open for visitors from 11.00 – 4.30 daily during the February Half-Term (17 – 25 February) and from Wednesday to Sunday in March. Staff and volunteers will be delighted to share the latest news on the otters with visitors.

For further information contact Bob Goodwin, National Trust Visitor Services Co-ordinator, Winchester City Mill, 01962 870057. 
robert.goodwin@nationaltrust.org.uk
The Thames: A young male otter has been found dead on the riverbank at Wapping in East London – this is the first otter record from the London stretch of the river for 100 years and it is believed that it found its way there via the River Lee, a tributary of the Thames.

Graeme McLaren of the Environment Agency stressed the importance of this find as an indication of the improved condition of the river. The otter was in good condition when it died and it may be that there are more in the area.”

*The Sun Online, 16/10/06*

The Mersey: Salmon have been found in the River Mersey in the Parrs Wood area for the first time in 300 years and environmentalists are hoping that this could also encourage the return of the otter.

*South Manchester Report 10/11/06*

Editor’s Note: *Otters were once so common along parts of the Mersey that they were considered a pest – there is even an area called Otterspool.*
Those of you who follow our work through the Internet will know that just before Christmas we received two new cubs, both from Cumbria, although they are not related.

You may remember Bonnie, who also came to us from that area and was brought up to Skye by our friend John McMinn. She was later released back into Cumbria in September 2005. Well John was again on hand to transport Sniffer and Eliza.

When Sniffer, the male, was found he was not well enough for the long journey north so we decided he should wait and get a bit stronger. The day before he was due to travel we had a call saying that a small female cub had been found clinging to a river bank. So we phoned John and he brought the two of them to IOSF.

At first they were kept separately to prevent any possible transfer of infection. Sniffer was straight into his food – nice fresh organic trout, but Eliza needed more coaxing! Then she went off the trout and we reverted back to a bottle of otter milk substitute which she loved.

Things went well until the end of the second week when Eliza went off the bottle too. There was nothing physically wrong with her as she was still extremely active – in fact it was pretty hard to keep her still enough to try and feed! So we took the decision to introduce her to Sniffer in the hope that having his company would encourage her to eat.
For the first few minutes they were all over each other but then they had a minor falling out which resulted in her retreating into the sleeping area. He sat in their small outrun and I am sure he was wondering what he had done wrong. By the end of that day he had managed to get his nose into the sleeping area but no more! By next morning they had made up and were curled up together asleep.

That day neither ate much but the following day Sniffer was back into his food. We watched what was going on through the webcam and we could see Eliza watching him – and then suddenly she went to her bowl and tucked into the trout!

Since then the two have been good mates – albeit sometimes they still have a slight squabble over fish! They have been weaned off the expensive trout and are now just starting to eat small whole fish. If you want to watch them you can see them on www.otter-webcam.34sp.com although sometimes you may just see a blanket with two otters hiding underneath!

During the afternoon of Sunday 21 January we received a call from Sabhal Mor Ostaig, the Gaelic College in the south of the island. An injured otter had gone into their workshop and curled up to sleep!

We thought that it would take ages to catch it, as workshops are always so full of bits and pieces for them to hide in. But when we arrived we found that the otter was still asleep and it was in the collecting box for a lawn mower! So all we had to do was cover the entrance, move the box next to our carrying box, remove the cover and the otter calmly walked into our box! All done in a matter of seconds!

continued over page
The otter is a juvenile which has obviously been fighting and has some wounds to its head. It has been treated with antibiotics and is recovering in one of the nursery pens.

Just before going to print we received another cub, this time from Bonnybridge, in central Scotland. This cub is about 12 weeks old and is a cub with “attitude”. He is very feisty and if you go too near he has a glint in his eye which reminds me of Clint Eastwood when he said “go ahead punk – make my day”! We will let you know how he progresses.

The latest news from Bangladesh is that Chitra is doing well and we hope to have more photos of him for the next issue.
OTTERS RETURN TO EDINBURGH BURN

A wildlife survey of the Burdiehouse Burn in Edinburgh has found signs of otters living along the banks. Only 20 years ago this burn was so dirty it was known as a “giant dog toilet” but trees have been planted and rubbish pulled from the burn and its banks in a series of clean-ups in recent years.

The discovery has encouraged local campaigners to bid for the Burdiehouse Burn Valley Park to be recognised as an official nature reserve. Should that happen, it could open the door to grants for further improvements and plans will be drawn up to reintroduce endangered water voles. It is also hoped that the river could attract kingfishers back to the area, which were prevalent in the late 1800s, but disappeared over the course of the 20th century.

Councillor Donald Anderson, who has been involved in the ongoing clean-up, said: “We were hoping to find water voles down in the burn, but we found signs that otters were there instead. As far as I am aware this is the first time it has been confirmed that otters are actually living in the burn. Considering 20 years ago the area was a mess and the burn itself was little more than a giant dog toilet, this is proof that all the hard work spent cleaning up the area has worked.”

Edinburgh Evening News, 22/01/07

OTTERS VISIT HOSPITAL

A friend of ours Carol Benson, who works at Broadford Hospital, phoned us one morning having just completed her night shift. The hospital has CCTV at the main doors and she had been watching it very early that morning when she noticed two unusual visitors. There in clear view were two otters!
She quickly called to her colleagues but by the time they arrived, of course the otters were gone. So Carol checked the video of the CCTV and there they were.

It appears that one of the otters had an injury to a paw as when they checked outside they found bloody footprints on the ground and on the glass of the door where it had stood up to look inside! But the injury doesn’t appear to have been serious as they both ran off into the bushes.

The otters did not stay for long and as far as we are aware they have not gone back. I don’t know if they had heard that there is an otter hospital in Broadford and had gone to the wrong place but we have had no further reports of an injured otter!

**OTTER TRUST CLOSES TO VISITORS**

The well-known Otter Trust Visitor Centre at Earsham in Suffolk has closed to the public permanently, although members of the Trust will still be able to visit by appointment.

In the 1950s and 1960s the otter suffered a serious decline largely due to pollution from organochlorines in agricultural chemicals. The Trust opened the Centre in 1976 with the intention of using profits to support an otter captive-breeding and reintroduction programme. The first animals were reintroduced in 1983 and the success of the programme meant that there have been no further releases of captive-bred otters since the 117th otter was released in 1999.

Now the founder of the centre, Philip Wayre, feels that there is no longer a need for British otters to be kept in captivity due to the success of such breeding and reintroduction schemes.
The Trust will be continuing with its conservation work but is extending it to include general wetland and moorland habitats and all associated wildlife. It owns five reserves, three in East Anglia and two in county Durham and wild otters visit at least four of them.

Norfolk News, 18/10/06

DECLINE IN SEA OTTERS

Sea otters have once again been added to the Endangered Species list in the US following a drastic decline in the Aleutian Islands and Alaska.

In 2007 Dr Zagrebelniy, of the Commander Islands Nature Reserve suggested that the decline in sea otter numbers could be the result of a reduction in the vast kelp forests. These seaweeds have a long term influence on the underwater fauna, both invertebrates and fish, some of which form part of the sea otters’ diet. Furthermore they provide vital resting areas for females with young.

The kelp forests around the Commander Islands were mapped from 1981-1986 but during an expedition in 2004 it was found that these seaweeds had almost disappeared. It is believed that this was caused by the extreme stormy weather, which occurred particularly during the winter of 2002/03. Winds of up to 50 m/s were recorded on 27/28 December 2002 and there is no doubt that such winds would cause catastrophic damage to the holdfasts of these seaweeds.

So far the Commander Islands population of sea otters has not been as badly effected as in other areas but with destruction of their habitat noticeable changes are expected in the near future.

Further work is necessary to monitor the population and to protect the otters from illegal hunting.

Information from Dr Sevostianov, President of the Commander Islands & BC Nature Protection and Conservation Association
GIANT OTTERS IN THE PANTANAL

The Pantanal, which lies south of the Amazon in Brazil, is the largest freshwater wetland left on our planet. It is the size of Ireland and has a huge biodiversity with about 125 mammal species and more than 650 types of bird. It is also one of the last strongholds of the giant otter.

A hunting ban in the late 1980s allowed numbers of giant otters to increase to an estimate of about 1,000 today, although these are very rough estimates. Charlie Munn, a former senior scientist with the Wildlife Conservation Society (USA), does believe that the species is still increasing. “There are hopeful signs that they could one day recover – if they are left alone and allowed to breed in peace”.

This is crucial as fishermen often view them as competition and persecute them, and unsustainable logging of mahogany is destroying the habitat. Gold mining is also a problem as mercury is used to extract the gold and this is a severely toxic chemical which builds up in the environment. Then there is also the risk of poaching.

One thing everyone can do is avoid buying mahogany unless it carries a seal from the Forest Stewardship Council to show it has been harvested sustainably.

*Defenders, Conservation Magazine of Defenders of Wildlife, Winter 2007*
OTTERS IN ITALY

In Serre Persano, in southern Italy, there are plans to open a big rubbish dump just a few meters from the Sele river and about 1 km from the WWF site named “Oasi di Persano”. This site protects otters in the Sele Valley and Persano Lake and their habitat and local people are campaigning against this dump.

IOSF is supporting this campaign and if you would like further information there are various websites about the issue – they are in Italian so please contact us if you would like the links. 

Information from Dr Giovanni Roviello, Istituto de Biostutture e Bioiimagini

PHOTO COMPETITION

Our competition this time is open to everyone, not just the kids. Last year the daughter of one of our supporters wrote to say that sadly her mother had died. Patricia Cownie had been a supporter for some time and was a great fan of all wildlife, caring deeply for its preservation. Her fun side showed in some photos she took of her toy otter in mischievous situations. Here are a couple for you to see.

So now it’s up to you – send us a photo of your toy otter in some unusual location. We will print the best and the winner will receive a Gaby Anderson mounted print. Closing date for entries will be 1st September 2007.
At long last the Children’s Otter Discovery Pack is out. We are thrilled with the result and, as you can see, the artwork of Lyn Wells makes it a really beautiful book.

Most of the pack is to do with Eurasian otters particularly in the UK, but a lot of the information is relevant to all otters throughout the world. Also included is a colour poster showing the different otter species, and the IOSF booklet “Otters in Britain”, which gives more detailed information and photos.

This pack is designed for children from 5-14 years to fit in with the National Curriculum but can also be used on their own, with friends or with teachers and parents. In each section there are some “Things you OTTER do” and then there are some special fun activities in “Paws for Action”.

This makes an ideal gift for a child or a useful classroom tool. Order it now from our online shop – www.ottershop.co.uk
Sea Otter Art Auction

We would like to thank Mrs Lesley Everett of Cambridgeshire for placing the winning bid in our Sea Otter Art Auction, and everyone who took part.

Gaby Anderson

We were very saddened recently to receive the news of Gaby Anderson’s death, following a long struggle with cancer. Many of you will have items of her wonderful artwork which we have had the pleasure of supplying to you. Gaby will be sadly missed, but as her husband Ian has said “in her paintings she will live on”.

Children’s Competition

Congratulations to James McAleer from Arran who produced a wonderful game for our last competition. Not only did he create a fun game which showed some of the problems faced by otters and things being done to help them, but he also made his own “otter” counters – he must have spent ages doing it but unfortunately we can’t reproduce it here. James will be receiving a copy of our new children’s Otter Discovery Pack.

Living on the island of Arran, James is lucky enough to be able to watch otters in the wild and he has also sent us a wonderful poem: …see over

Otter News on PDF

Help IOSF to put more money into otter conservation by reading your OtterNews online. If you are happy to do this please email us at otterHQ@aol.com quoting your sponsorship number, and reduce our printing and postage costs. However, if you prefer, we are still happy to send out a printed copy to you. Your OtterNews is now printed on 80% recycled paper.
The otter pads by at the water’s edge,
Hunting for a juicy fish.
A mouse, scurrying into a hedge,
Sees the otter hunting for its favourite dish.

A movement in the water catches his eye.
A trout or maybe an eel?
He takes one look at the dark night sky
And dives after his favourite meal.

The fish is a slippery eel.
It is swift and strong.
But the otter surfaces with its favourite meal.
He has finally won.

The otter swims towards his den
Then grasps the bank with his paws.
He looks around for signs of men
Then climbs up, the fish in his jaws.

Once in his den,
He lies down and starts eating the tasty fish.
He finishes it, and then
Goes to sleep, dreaming of his favourite dish – FISH

by James McAleer