

# Real-life tale of the river bank is an otter delight

**H**UMAN beings have never had the easiest relationship with otters. For centuries we hunted them remorselessly, and why? Because they ate fish.

Really, there was no other reason. Otters tasted horrible.

In the 15th century, Henry VI instituted the role of Valet of our Otterhounds and in the early 1600s, the reward for a dead otter was sixpence — no mean sum.

But otters survived the slings and arrows of desperate huntsmen. It was the introduction of intensive farming in the Fifties that actually did for their numbers, as it did for many native species.

Organochlorine pesticides, and later the organophosphates, found their way into the food chain, and although they didn't actually kill otters, they did render them infertile. Otters weren't dying; they were

## NATURE

### THE OTTERS' TALE

by Simon Cooper  
(William Collins £16.99)

## MARCUS BERKMANN

dying out. By the Nineties, they were present in only a handful of British counties and rarely seen — even by people who were looking for them.

Otters keep themselves to themselves. They don't harm anyone. They are also, as Simon Cooper's lovely book points out, exceptionally beautiful creatures with expressive faces and more hair (140,000 per square centimetre) than almost any animal on the planet.

They're big: a fully grown male weighs around 22lb, about the same as a beagle. Unusually for mammals, they move much

more easily in water than on land. (Though they don't know instinctively how to swim, their mothers have to teach them.)

They are solitary animals who mark the limits of their territory with spraints, a rather delightful old English word for piles of poo. As it happens, spraints smell appalling and destroy all nearby vegetation, but at least they help us find out where otters are.

Cooper is a countryman and nature writer who is photographed wearing green wellies on his book's inside back cover. He lives near Nether Wallop in Hampshire — 'wallop' meaning 'hidden valley'.

There are marshes near his home known as the Badlands, which are perfect for otters, and he has been observing a mother and her four pups there for several years. Indeed, he went so far as to give the mother a name — Kuschta — and dream up her back story, which he tells here.

His book, therefore, is a strange mix of



Unique Insight: Cooper and otter Topaz

fiction and non-fiction, a work simultaneously of imagination and cold, hard fact. It shouldn't work, but it does, triumphantly.

Kuschta eats fish and sleeps under trees and lays down her spraints, and when she is about two years old she meets Mion, the local male otter. Their sexplay occupies several pages and is rather more entertaining than the human equivalent.

Mion, like a few men I've known, scarpers, leaving the pregnancy and bringing up the litter to Kuschta, who never expected anything else. Otters are one-parent families by inclination and tradition.

Cooper, I'm glad to report, steers clear of the linguistic excesses and stylistic curlicues you find in too many nature writers.

Instead, he has read about otters, he has watched them, he has

thought about them and imagined himself in their skin.

What might help him, curiously, is their essential unknowability. Rats and foxes have adapted themselves to human habitation, but otters never have. They just go their own sweet way, doing what they have always done in the ever-smaller acreage that allows them to do so.

For what underlies this, as it does in almost every nature book now published, is the constant and absolute need for conservation.

In his acknowledgements, Cooper does not thank his friends and relatives, but 'those who tirelessly campaigned to save the otter from extinction'. Without them, he says, the English otter would now be 'a natural history footnote'.

What a horrible thought. And what a wonderful book.