

Natural History

Simon Cooper

THE OTTERS' TALE

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The Wallop Brook is a chalk stream, a tributary of the River Test in Hampshire, arguably the home to the best-known trout fishery in the world. Aquifers deep in the chalk are its principal source, wellsprings of crystal clear water that confer their gin clarity on streams that lose their transparency only when land runoff washes silt into the flow. For naturalists like Simon Cooper, such wild aquaria offer incomparable opportunities for observing the lives of their inhabitants, including the crayfish, bullheads, trout, salmon and grayling which, given the decreasing abundance of their preferred prey the largely nocturnal eel, are the principal wild food of chalk stream otters. Cooper lives in and works from a partially restored mill beside which he maintains a rainbow trout fishery stocked from rearing channels nearby. Not surprisingly, the stocked fish are highly attractive to otters which compete with the paying anglers as predators of the plump and relatively guileless reared rainbows. Many a fishery owner would have seen the otters as an undesirable threat to his livelihood. Cooper, however, willingly exchanged the loss of some of his fish for the opportunity to follow the fate of otter families at first hand.

A glimpse from his office window first drew the otters to his attention. He was able to watch their fishing behaviour and the relationships between mothers and young at close quarters. Fascinated by what he saw, he was soon making detailed observations of otters not just at the mill but from the banksides of both his home brook and the Test itself. He was to discover that the lives of male and female otters

are very different, that apparently affectionate bonds between mothers and young are vital in honing the fishing skills of their offspring which are essential to their long-term survival and reproduction. However, he also found that adults of both sexes can exhibit a ruthlessness towards their young and to one another which is shocking to all but an evolutionary biologist. He summarizes his observations by telling the detailed story of a mother and her young and the male otter with which they occasionally interact. He does so with the charm of a Kenneth Grahame but with the scientific rigour of modern behavioural science. It is the best popular account of the lives of otters written so far.

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