

OBITUARY

James Leigh Roslin Williams
5th February 1939 - 4th February 2014

Vic Simpson

It is a great irony that some of the most influential people in wildlife conservation have also been hunters – Theodore Roosevelt was instrumental in establishing the National Parks System in the USA yet went on game shooting safaris in Africa, Sir Peter Scott created the Wildlife and Wetland Trust in the UK but started life shooting wild geese for sport. James Williams may not have been as well known as these luminaries but he was hugely successful in combining his love of hunting, fishing and shooting with a life time commitment to the conservation of otters. His achievements in otter conservation were recognised in 2013 when he was awarded an MBE (Member of the British Empire) in the Queen’s Birthday Honours. The award was presented to him by Prince William at Buckingham Palace. Shortly after this he was elected a Fellow of the Linnean Society, a rarely bestowed honour and one of which James was justifiably proud.



James grew up in Westmorland, a rural county of hills and moors, rivers and lakes in north west England. There, under the guidance of his father, he learnt to fish, shoot and hunt with hounds. In so doing he learnt about relationships between predator and prey, species and habitat, food availability and season and the many other things that make the natural world function. After leaving school James went to St Andrew’s University in Scotland where, perhaps surprisingly in view of his love of natural history, he took a degree in classical languages rather than zoology. However, the degree served him well as James went on to teach English, initially at a boys’ school in north west England but then at Taunton in Somerset. From an otter conservation point of view this move to south west England was to prove fortuitous in later years

James’ father had been a Master of Otterhounds and James undoubtedly learnt a great deal about the habits and behaviour of otters as he accompanied him on hunts. It was not surprising that in later years James too, became a Master. At that time otters in the UK were widespread but when, during the 1970s, it became apparent that the otter population had collapsed the hunts voluntarily stopped hunting. It was always a source of annoyance to James that so little use was made of the great expertise that the hunts had on otters or the hundreds of years of records that they kept. This frustration is evident in a publication by James in a 1989 OSG Bulletin where he recalls that between 1957 and 1980 - the main period of the decline – the hunts recorded 26 apparently blind otters with white or opaque eyes. However, no proper post-mortem examinations were carried out and James concludes “*An opportunity to learn much has been lost*”. In view of later research carried out in Cornwall on eye lesions in relation to pollutants and vitamin A this is almost certainly true!

One of James' other passions was fishing, particularly for salmonids. In fact it was whilst on a fishing outing on the River Exe in Devon in 1968 that he proposed to his girlfriend! It is said he "*was so re-assured by Elizabeth's response that he risked popping off to fish ... leaving her to pack away the picnic alone.*"! However, Elizabeth is an equally competent and enthusiastic fisherman and this undoubtedly contributed to their enduring relationship. And wherever they fished, be it Devon or Scotland or some distant land, they always kept an eye open for otters!

During the 1970s and 1980s, when the crash in the otter population had become all too apparent, the Vincent Wildlife Trust funded and ran the Otter Haven Project. This involved doing surveys for evidence of otters and one of its officers, Libby Lenton, sought James' assistance in carrying out surveys of Somerset's rivers. Signs such as spraints and pad marks, let alone sightings, during this period were depressingly few and far between. More extensive surveying was needed and this required 'Manpower'! With James' infectious enthusiasm and persuasive ability the Somerset Otter Group (SOG), which had become quiescent with the decline of otters, was re-launched. James was elected Chairman and soon teams of volunteers were persuaded to turn out for surveying on prescribed dates and locations each year. The results were then assembled, analysed and discussed at regular SOG meetings. These evening meetings were also social events, usually held in a pub, often with an invited speaker. Under James' dynamic leadership the SOG went from strength to strength and it is largely thanks to his unrelenting determination that Somerset's otter population is almost certainly the most thoroughly surveyed in the UK.

Another major strength of the SOG was the recording of dead otters and, where possible, their collection for post-mortem examination. The cause of the population crash had never been established and even as late as the 1980s there was no system in place for proper post-mortem examination of otters in the UK. Vic Simpson, a veterinary surgeon working at the Ministry of Agriculture Veterinary Investigation Centre in Cornwall had started to examine the few otters found dead each year in Cornwall and Devon but this work was unofficial. However, in 1995, partly as a result of EU legislation on water quality, the National Rivers Authority (which later became the Environment Agency), undertook to fund post-mortem examinations on otters and perform toxicological analysis on their organs. As originally envisaged, otters from Cornwall and Devon would be examined by Vic but those from other counties would be examined at the School of Biological Sciences, Cardiff University. James felt strongly that it would be preferable to have the Somerset otters examined at the same laboratory as those from neighbouring Devon. When Lyn Jenkins, the NRA officer in charge of this project, also recommended this it was agreed that not only otters from Somerset but also from the other counties in southern England should be sent to the government laboratory in Cornwall. When Vic retired from government service in 2001 and set up the Wildlife Veterinary Investigation Centre this arrangement continued and the result was a long and fruitful relationship between the NRA/Environment Agency, SOG and the other county groups, and Vic.

The momentum for research into otters increased markedly during the 1990s and when, in 1998, the Otters and Rivers Project superseded the VWT project otter research took another big step forward. The project was a partnership between the Environment Agency, the county Wildlife Trusts and the water industry and James became the project officer for Somerset Wildlife Trust. Although one of the main aims of the project was to monitor the levels and possible effects of environmental

pollutants on otters it was also a means by which to learn more about otter biology and disease.

One disease that James became particularly involved in was infection with the bile fluke *Pseudamphistomum truncatum*. This parasite was not known to occur in the UK until 2004 when it was discovered by Vic Simpson in three otters from Somerset. As the parasite had not been seen during earlier post-mortems the question arose as to where it had come from. The parasite is carried by fish and James, with his intimate knowledge of the area, pointed out that two alien species of fish, imported from eastern Europe where the parasite is common, had recently colonised the Somerset Levels. The findings were published with James as a co-author and there followed a series of publications and research into the parasite. However, in 2007, following severe government-imposed cuts to their budget, the Environment Agency ceased funding otter research at the Wildlife Veterinary Investigation Centre. James was forthright in expressing his displeasure but as Cardiff University were managing to continue their work – and they had also started to study *P. truncatum* – he threw his weight behind supporting them. James was a man of action and when his deep freezers were full and no transport was forthcoming he even delivered the frozen bodies to Cardiff himself! He also most generously provided personal financial support for their research, including the cost of attendance at the IUCN XIth IOC conference in Pavia in 2011. This was total commitment.

Anyone who ever talked to James, or more particularly read one of his letters, would appreciate his command of the English language. He could be witty and amusing but also outspoken and fearless, particularly when expressing his views or recalling his experiences in life. It was no surprise therefore when he decided to write a book about otters. “The Otter Amongst Us” was published in 2000 and is a record of James’ lifetime observations on otters and is a delight to read. He went on to publish a second book “The Otter” in 2010 which is based largely on the results of the scientific papers that James and other otter enthusiasts had made possible.

There is a saying in English “They don’t make them like that anymore” That is certainly true of James Williams.