

## *Life on the River* **The Otter Report**

By R. S. R. FITTER

"HUNTING does undoubtedly involve suffering for the otter" was the conclusion in 1951 of the Home Office Committee on Cruelty to Wild Animals, which went on to recommend a thorough investigation of the natural history of the otter, and to suggest that hunting should only be permitted on rivers where otters were proved to be doing harm.

The only concrete result so far of the Committee's deliberations has been the formation, on the initiative of Major C. W. Hume of the Universities Federation for Animal Welfare, of the Otter Committee, to carry out this investigation and this was done in December 1951. The Otter Committee consisted of twenty-one members, eleven of them representing various interested organisations, the rest being well known naturalists. Dr. Edward Hindle, F.R.S., was Chairman. Dr. Harrison Matthews, F.R.S., supervised our investigator Miss Marie Stephens, and I was Hon. Secretary. The Committee could not have achieved as much as it did but for a substantial grant for two years from the Nature Conservancy. The result of its deliberations and researches, *The Otter Report*, by Marie N. Stephens, has now been published, and is obtainable from Ufaw, 7a Lamb's Conduit Passage, W.C.1, for 10s 6d. (post free).

### **FOOD OF THE OTTER**

The Committee is the first to admit the incompleteness of what is nevertheless the most comprehensive body of information on the natural history of the otter ever assembled. Most of the crucial questions about the food of the otter remain unanswered, for it is clear that the otter is a general feeder and it is impossible to give a general or blanket answer to the question, is the otter harmful? Whether the otter is harmful or not can in fact only be decided by the local circumstances of each river, and the Committee had neither the time nor the resources to make a survey of even a handful of rivers to determine this point. An otter will eat whatever fish it finds in a river, and a number of other things besides, such as crayfish, moorhens and water voles. On a trout farm an otter can never be welcome, but on a trout or salmon river it is arguable that an otter is merely removing a small proportion of a population whose total bulk is anyway determined by the amount of food available. This of course is what the angler is also anxious to do, and some anglers are more sporting than others in their attitude to their four-legged rival. My own feeling is that they could well leave him alone, but then I like otters and I am not an angler.

One obscure point in the life history of the otter does seem to have been illuminated by the *Otter Report*, and that is the time



(Top) Otter footprints or "seals".

(Below) Typical entrance to otter's holt.

(These two photographs by L. B. Nettleton are illustrations from *The Otter Report*, and we are greatly indebted to U.F.A.W. for the loan of the blocks.)





of year at which cubs are born, on which naturalists and otter-hunters of many years' experience are both liable to hold diametrically opposed views. On the evidence collected by the Committee it does look as if otter cubs are liable to be dropped at any time of year, and this means that there can be no true close season, the present otter hunting season being apparently fixed for the convenience of the hunters rather than for the protection of the otters.