

THE NATURAL HISTORY OF THE OTTER (THE OTTER REPORT).
By MARIE N. STEPHENS. The Universities Federation for
Animal Welfare, 10s. 6d.; or, for members of the Fauna
Preservation Society, through the Society, 7s. 6d.

The White Paper on Cruelty to Wild Animals¹ concluded that hunting otters involved suffering to the otter, and that to a greater degree than in most other field sports practised in Great Britain; if control of numbers was necessary, trapping and shooting would either be as cruel or be ineffective. "Therefore," the Report continues, "much depends on the need for control, and that can only be decided when more is known about the habits and way of life of the otter. We recommend that a thorough investigation should be conducted . . . into the natural history of the otter and particularly into its feeding habits in various river conditions. If it is confirmed that substantial harm would be caused to the fisheries of any rivers, were the otter population not controlled, it might be desirable to permit hunting to continue on those rivers only."

In the year following the publication of the White Paper an "Otter Committee" was set up on the initiative of UFAW to promote the investigation recommended. The Committee was authoritative and widely representative. Miss M. N. Stephens was appointed investigator in October, 1952, continuing until the end of 1954. This book is her report, subject to an unspecified amount of editing by Mr. R. S. R. Fitter and Mr. H. N. Southern. The author has not permitted herself any general conclusions and the book does not suggest that the Otter Committee will themselves undertake this task, although that may well be their intention. One would at least have liked to have had Miss Stephens' opinion.

The book may be regarded in two ways. Firstly whether it presents sufficient information to answer the question that prompted the investigation—in simple terms, does the otter's feeding habits justify hunting it? The reader may be struck by a sentence that appears on page 20, which infers that hunting tends to conserve the otter population:—

"In both cases (after World Wars I and II) stocks of otters were very depleted when the hunts did restart, and it took some time for word to get round to the local people that the hounds were back and for numbers to begin increasing again."

¹ Report of the Committee on Cruelty to Wild Animals, 1951. Her Majesty's Stationery Office, London, 3s. 6d.

If this is the view of the author as it certainly is of many hunters, then the basic assumption of the White Paper on otter control is the very opposite of the truth. The investigation is not, however, content with such a facile conclusion but provides material to answer a wider question, namely should the otter be protected (not just from cruelty) either absolutely or subject to exceptions? For the purpose of maintaining the species in England and Wales, the answer seems clearly to be "no", although that is not stated.

It is pleasant to record that the otter appears to be holding its own and is not seriously depleted by the recognized hunts, which incidentally now impose restrictions tending to favour the otter's escape. About half the otters "found" are killed. Neither does the otter seem to be in jeopardy from shooting or trapping, nor from any of the new forms of menace, which the modern age is constantly inflicting on wild life. It would be pleasanter still to record that the otter suffered no human interference at all, but that is too much to hope for and we may be thankful that the otter is no worse treated than it is.

The other aspect from which this book can be considered is as a short monograph on the otter. In this respect it is admirable. A series of chapters cover distribution in England and Wales, breeding, parasites and diseases, otters in captivity, and their feeding habits. This is compressed into sixty-odd pages with a further six pages of tables about body-weights and food analyses. There is also a bibliography and index.

Information has been gathered both from the scattered literature of the otter and from many contemporary sources, such as hunt officials, water bailiffs and keepers, but the author has herself spent all (or presumably most) of her term as official investigator in the field or on laboratory work. The difficulty of direct observation is summed up in her remark that the best way to see otters is to take up fishing. However, otters do make their presence known to a trained observer by various signs of their activity and Miss Stephens shows on a map how numerous these can be on a suitable stretch of water, closely studied.

Anyone inclined to take up otter watching or tracking will find this book indispensable. If it adds little very new it impartially summarizes what is already known; if it is slight in appearance, it is quite devoid of padding and it is attractively written.

The Fauna Preservation Society did well to participate in this investigation and the status of the otter should be kept under review. It can never be numerous, for it is by disposition

a solitary animal and its habitat is limited. A sudden change in circumstances could quite rapidly bring the otter to the verge of extinction in Great Britain.

G. F.

FIELD GUIDE TO BRITISH DEER. Compiled and edited by F. J. TAYLOR PAGE. Mammal Society of the British Isles (Brock Cottage, Lyndhurst, Hants). 10s. 6d.

Congratulations: to the Mammal Society of the British Isles for sponsoring and publishing, and to its Deer Group and Jim Taylor Page for providing the material for the best guide that I know to the field identification of any group of British wild animals. The Group had the advantage of needing to consider only six species, two natives, the red and roe deer; one long-established alien, the fallow; and three recent aliens, the sika, muntjac and Chinese water deer. Of these the Chinese water deer is so locally distributed, in Bedfordshire, Buckinghamshire and Hampshire, that it does not receive the full treatment of the other five. These five are discussed in great detail, and with profuse illustration, under the headings of habitat, tracks (where useful outlines show the differences between the spoor of deer and domestic animals), droppings, voice, antler development, seasonal change of coat, gait, food and feeding habits, daily activities and seasonal rhythm of behaviour, i.e. when calves are born, antlers grown, rutting occurs, etc. There are also most useful hints on clothing and equipment for deer watchers, and suggestions for observation and research. Finally, there is a detailed, county-by-county survey of the known distribution of the six species.

The gaps still remaining in our knowledge of the habits and distribution of the feral deer especially, are due to two factors, the ignorance of most naturalists on how to identify deer and the difficulty of observing deer in the wild, even if you do know them apart. Both these difficulties are largely solved by this admirable little book and there is no longer the slightest excuse for deer remaining a neglected group of British mammals. As one twelve-year old has already remarked, "Even I can understand it."

R. S. R. F.

WILD ENCOUNTERS. By EILEEN A. SOPER. Routledge and Kegan Paul. 25s.

There are some books which, for one reason or another, maybe the charm of their writing, or their sincerity, or for