

FISHERY MANAGEMENT: PREDATION

CHRIS CURRIE broaches the controversial but extremely important topic of predation and how it directly affects fisheries and what can be done to stop it!

This is a big topic that the industry is suffering from at varying levels, from crayfish all the way up to otters. The predators directly affect the quality of the fishing and livelihoods when they become a persistent problem. The soul-destroying bit for the fishery managers and consultants is visiting a fishery owner on the brink of losing his or her home and business, while critically endangered species like eels and water voles become even more threatened with extinction but it feels like there's no

Carp predation is a serious topic!



Otters are a contentious subject.

The BBC team were worried about the avocet chicks they had up there as otters will take birds if they can
Hugh Miles, film-maker



Breeding pairs of avocets have been hit by otters in and around Norfolk's River Wensum system.

Now otters put rare birds on the menu

● Fears mount for breeding avocets

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The UK's growing otter population is not only working its way through our freshwater fish stocks, but is now affecting the breeding habits of our birds, too.

Angling Times can reveal that the RSPB's own 'poster boy', the avocet, is having its breeding disrupted by the ever increasing numbers of otters in and around Norfolk's Wensum river system, leading experts to fear for other wildlife as the predatory mammal's numbers grow.

Having been an acute problem for the river's fish population for many years, the mass and subsequently unchecked reintroduction of

otters across the UK is devastating fish stocks around the country. This latest revelation, combined with the statement by Fisheries Minister Richard Benyon reported in last week's AT that 'otter numbers need to be regulated', adds further weight to calls for this apex predator's numbers to be checked.

Founder of Norfolk's Penthorpe nature reserve, the home of BBC's Springwatch, Bill Makins spoke to AT about the issue.

"Otters have always been around this area, but never in these numbers. There are now so many that they're having a hugely disruptive impact on the breeding avocets we have at the Buxton Conservation Trust, of which I'm a trustee. This year the birds tried at least three times to breed, as a result the numbers that did were down by around two thirds. It's got to the point where we'll have to erect

low-level electric fences to keep the otters away and protect the birds.

"We're also seeing the otters take water birds and pheasants, as well as eating the rare white-clawed crayfish," he added.

Filmmaker, angler and Springwatch contributor Hugh Miles has also seen first hand the damage that the otter is doing in the area. "When I was up at Penthorpe earlier in the year with Springwatch, the



The rare avocet is the symbol for the RSPB.

problem was evident. The BBC team were worried about the avocet chicks they had up there as otters will take birds if they can.

"I also did some underwater filming on the Wensum for the programme. Two thirds of the chub and barbel in there had some form of otter damage."

Mike Heylin, chairman of the Angling Trust, spoke to AT about the problem, stating: "When you put an apex predator into an environment with no controls, this is what happens. It's bad for fish, it's bad for birds and other wildlife, as this case highlights, and it will ultimately be bad for otters as their numbers get further out of control."

"The sooner anglers' calls to have otter numbers controlled are listened to, the better, and the trust welcomes Richard Benyon's recent comments on the subject."

viable solution. Hopefully this article will go some way to outlining the measures currently in place and I would implore everyone to express their support and get behind the organisations currently fighting to get changes quicker. Without people's time, lobbying of the opinion to the wider public, outside of angling and money, things can't change quicker.

I'm going to highlight the three most damaging predators. Something to consider with all three is the exploding impact of their breeding, either with protected or licensed legislation, which ultimately means management of their population is hindered or restricted completely, which impacts on the overall environment of all species. Remember, while singularly they make a dramatic impact on fish stocks, together their voracious nature on different parts of the water ecosystem, be it eggs, small fish and specimen fish, leaves little hope of an established annual year-class population and this means anglers and the wider public have something that's becoming increasingly scarce to enjoy.

Starting with the American signal crayfish (*Pacifastacus leniusculus*), many disregard them but they are a major damaging part of any ecosystem because they are bigger and more aggressive than our native crayfish and carry a fungal disease that is fatal to them.

The American red signal crayfish can live up to 12 years and has already annihilated the smaller native white-clawed crayfish from most of the waterways in the south of England. It digs burrows up to three feet long in riverbanks where it lays more than 275 eggs at a time each year. The female breeds from the age of about two, when it is 40 millimetres long. The eggs are fertilised by the male in October/November. They are carried folded within the female's tail until May when the young are released, if they can escape her jaws.

At a time of increased flooding risk the numbers and size of the burrows is increasingly causing riverbanks to collapse. They feed ravenously on almost anything, including plants, invertebrates, snails, small fish and fish eggs. It is also cannibalistic and makes a

meal of its own young. The fish eggs and plant destruction are the most damaging because they directly affect the small-fish populations, with crayfish in high numbers actually disrupting whole age ranges and batches, meaning no recruitment from the long-standing population.

The ecosystem that crayfish reside and predate on is reliant on the fish eggs, so high numbers of crayfish means that nature recruitment of fish is never likely to materialise. Have you ever wondered why you never caught smaller fish from your water?

The best way to eradicate these red-clawed pests is by trapping and killing or eating. This was the reason they were introduced to fish farms in the 1970s. On rivers you need to obtain a trapping licence from the Environment Agency (EA).

The cormorant (*Phalacrocorax carbo*) and goosander (*Mergus merganser*) are highly voracious birds that will dive and pursue fish underwater.

Cormorants are used by Asian fishermen to hunt. They were predominately sea birds but have migrated more inland in the last decade and are a serious threat to fisheries, consuming up to 2lb of fish per bird, per day. They are at their most prevalent in winter, where the closest estimate of up to 350,000 pairs are suspected

Large carp can be easy targets for a nimble otter.



Not the sight any fishery manager wants to see.

to overwinter on UK shores, with an influx of hundreds of thousands more migrating through each year. The explosion of these predators has really affected the farming and fishery industries. They damage fish without eating them and can decimate whole age groups, especially the silver fish because they are perfectly sized prey.

Cormorants nests high in trees or on steep, rocky sea cliffs. The droppings are so acidic that most trees that they nest in are stripped of foliage.

The female lays two to six eggs per clutch and the young are born blind. The parents feed the nestlings with half-digested food that is dropped into the nests. Later, the young birds poke their heads into the gullet of the adults to feed.

Cormorants can live up to 18 years. The Angling Trust and Predator Action Group have campaigned for lethal control and currently there are 16 area-based licences granted covering many fisheries in valleys across England. The

press release and licensing granted by Angling Trust in October shows a new national annual limit of 6,000 for cormorants for 2017; anyone can appreciate this is just not enough.

When I visit sites around the valleys of England on consultancy and travel past nature reserves nestled among fisheries, the overpopulation of dozens of overwintering cormorants cohabiting so closely to fisheries is always very apparent. My findings show a good correlation between a lack of silver fish in the neighbouring waters because these birds can view a them from two miles up and need 2lb of fish a day on average to sustain their growth. They can, and will, hunt in packs, herding balls of prey fish against a bank, much like whales or tuna do in the sea, and dive/swim through them grabbing what they can. The number of birds overwintering in the UK this year has been the highest on record. This is from a source that I had lengthy meetings with recently and is in control of licensing in the UK. This is certainly worrying because historically they migrate to Holland over our winter to feed.

This is truly devastating quote that I read from the EA: "Nearly two million fish were released into our rivers in 2015, 452,000 actual young fish and 13 million larvae. They were released into rivers all over the country, as follows: 53,729 chub, 46,850 dace, 67,875 roach, 66,976 bream, 15,231 tench, 88,034 crucian carp, 35,125 rudd, 20,000 grayling."

However, according to Angling Trust's collated cormorant predation figures, the EA's stocking of our rivers and stillwaters with small fish doesn't even keep up with predation by overwintering cormorants, let alone by the other ever-increasing range of predators.

The otter (*Lutra lutra*) is one of the top apex predators, feeding mainly on fish, water birds, eggs, amphibians and crustaceans. They have their cubs in underground burrows, known as aholt. Excellent and lithe swimmers, the young are in the water by 10 weeks of age. In my opinion, they offer the biggest, most unimpeded threat to the UK fish industry that I've certainly seen in the last 20 years. Their voracious attacks on fish and the livelihoods connected across this country, because they have successfully populated every river and

Eels are an otter's primary food source.



All UK species are at risk.



The typical areas to be targeted by otters.



county, has been nothing short of startling, with the releasing of rehabilitated and captive-bred animals being the biggest factor relating to this rise in the population. Wildlife groups and the Environment Agency would have you believe that the increase is thanks to the cleaning up of our rivers and waterways through rod licence monies, which is one of its biggest incomes, and the banning of harmful pesticides and hunting, and numerous conservation projects across the country to provide suitable habitat for them.

"The Angling Trust will call for Defra and EA to stop referring to otter numbers as successful restoration of river systems when the majority of rivers are failing to reach good ecological status and many fish populations are seriously depleted." Angling Trust press release, May 2015.

"Nearly 75 per cent of our rivers are failing to reach good ecological status, and many of these are failing because of

poor fish populations." Angling Trust press release, May 2015.

The Wildlife Trust has led the way on such breeding projects. The damage that these apex predators will do to the countryside will be irreversible. During the colder, winter months when the larder in running water is rather bare, otters have a natural tendency to target large stillwater fish, in particular carp. When everything warms up they prey upon water birds like coots, moorhens and mallards, plus their eggs and young, and newts, frogs, toads, snakes, slow worms and lizards and so on. I truly hope that these organisations that actively promote this population rise with joyous backslapping appreciate the damage they have caused before it's too late!

At the last count, one big avian organisation had fenced 28 of its reserves, with another 13 in the pipeline, to help prevent otters damaging rare sites of endangered birds that are ground nesting.

I plead with all members of the industry and anyone who understands the devastation caused by these animals, and many other predatory threats the fishery industry faces, to put your support and financial clout behind organisations like the Predation Action Group, which is lobbying the government for changes in the legislation to allow control of the unimpeded surge of mass predation. Especially the otter,

which is singularly the biggest threat to a multi-million-pound industry I've ever experienced. Plus many other industries, including the bird groups and wildlife groups that applaud such a population spike at present. I have witnessed the destruction first-hand on many fisheries over the last two winters, with last winter being especially bad for otter traffic and many owners despairing as they witness loss, and some total loss, of businesses to otter predation.

From discussions I've had with government peers regarding this issue, the governing body that presides over the issue will NOT be looking at any legislation changes in the next five years and I have been advised that it's unlikely to change for a further five after that! The consequence of this conversation and the deep-rooted sentiment meant I couldn't witness the industry and my hard work self-destruct and fencing the fishery is the only viable option in the short term.

After clients found no viable alternative to help them fence their lake from this apex predator due to other companies' time constraints, I moved quickly to work on legislation change and offer a fencing material supply outlet and fence-building service alternative to the current option, which many of my customers were elated to be able to capitalise on.

I feel strongly about protecting the future of the fish industry for the kids and this country and it's something that I and many others have worked hard to build over a number of decades to be enjoyed. Please, if you have or know of an unfenced fishery, don't gamble on its future. For every lake that gets fenced, that pushes the otters a step closer to the unfenced fishery and I would love to help eradicate the harrowing picture of a half-eaten fish and fishless lakes that has blighted the industry and has been imprinted and ingrained on my mind for the last five years.

Get in touch to change the future of your fishery.

Please contact us for more information on any of the above through our brand-new website www.cmconsultancyservices.co.uk or our social media links on the website. ☺

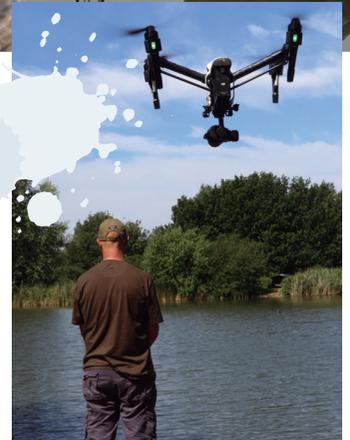
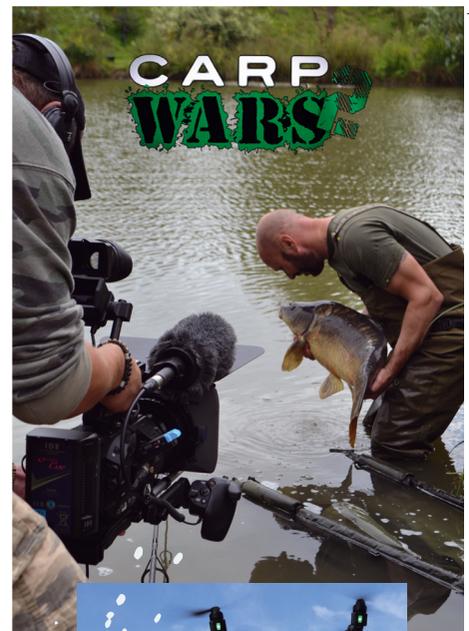
NEWS

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE SUPPLEMENT?

In the November issue of Total Carp we advertised on the next month page that this month would have an exclusive 32-page Carp Wars supplement. Unfortunately, we simply couldn't complete it in time for this issue, and we only like to put out the very best content with the very best design possible. If we had rushed it we wouldn't have been happy with it and wouldn't have wanted to put it in your hands. To ensure we do the supplement justice we will be spending longer on it and it will be included in the January issue.

If, however, you cannot wait for your Carp Wars fix, then the TV airing and online streaming will commence on November 30th on Sky Sports Action at 19.30, and then is available to stream on FishingTV the following day. Each episode will be on the same outlets every Thursday until mid-March.

The second apology comes from also not being able to fit in the 'How to care for your powerpacks' as previously listed. Once again, the piece is so in depth that time constraints got the better of us and we had so much editorial and gear items that we wanted to cram into this 196-page December issue that we sadly have to sacrifice some of the more abstract ideas. However, please rest assured that these items will be getting covered and when they do you will definitely want to check them out!



Cormorants are another typical threat