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Sunday

I bought an old mill – and then Kuschta moved in...

NATURE NOTES

Boudicca Fox-Leonard meets a fisherman who shares his waterside home – and trout lake – with a family of otters

Looking back, all the signs that Simon Cooper was sharing his home with one of Britain's most secretive mammals were right in front of him: the paw prints down by the river bank, the half-eaten rainbow trout, the brown patches of grass.

But the professional fly fisherman supposed a cat was responsible for the tracks, a heron for the fish and who-knows-what for those patches.

"With hindsight, I really was incredibly thick," laughs the 57-year-old who, 18 years on from buying an abandoned watermill straddling a chalk stream in Hampshire, now knows exactly what those brown patches mean.

"Otters are very repetitive. They walk the same path for generations, and they pee in the same spot. It kills the grass and turns it brown."

Today there's very little that Simon doesn't know about *Lutra lutra*. But by the time the penny finally dropped, long after moving to Nether Wallop Mill, in the heart of the Test Valley, where he runs fly-fishing holidays, the otters had been robbing him blind of fish for five years. Far from being incensed, though, Simon has found himself utterly charmed.

"They are just extraordinary creatures. When I look outside at night I see them running along the river bank, or their little eyes reflecting in the moonlight. Last night I could hear them making that loud 'eek eek eek' noise. I've grown to love them," he says.

'They've eaten 90 fish in three months. I'm the Tesco of the otter world!'

book called *The Otters' Tale*. Following in the footsteps of Henry Williamson's Twenties' classic *Tarka the Otter*, it weaves a personal story of a female otter called Kuschta with a natural history of the British Isles, unravelling the complexity of a mammal that has lived on the planet for 20 million years.

The animals were persecuted from the Middle Ages due to their reputation as a "fish-killer", and otter hunting was only banned in 1978. But the poisoning of rivers by organochlorine pesticides was far more devastating to the otter population and by the Nineties otters had all but disappeared from Britain's waterways. Yet they have managed to claw their way back, aided by an ecological clean-up and a spike in numbers of crayfish, an otter food staple. In 2011, a survey found otters in all 48 English counties.

Kuschta's arrival with her cubs in 2014 was, for Simon, a sign of the rejuvenation. Where previous otters passing through Nether Wallop kept out of sight, there was no missing Kuschta and her cubs as she taught them to hunt for food. "They're incapable of doing things quietly; as they take to the water you hear this awful wheezing, like an old man with bronchitis," he says.

It is his observations of that first litter that forms the backbone of *The Otters' Tale*, which lyrically captures the ferocity of an otter's life. "They can be vicious mammals and will ruthlessly control their population," Simon says.

Up close and personal: Simon Cooper and Kuschta, his resident female otter, currently raising her second litter at Nether Wallop Mill

three cubs are around five months old and the other night Simon sat outside on a bench until 2am in the moonlight as they gambolled around. "They occasionally come up and look at me – but mostly they completely ignore me."

"You can hear them swim in, then pull themselves up out of the water and onto the beam. Eventually they'll get bored. Otters are not very good at staying still."

While there are rumours of koi carp massacres by otters, Simon insists that "otters are scarce, fish are plentiful".

At least, that used to be the case. During the summer, Simon's trout lake was full. "There were so many you could almost walk across their backs," Simon says. But today the population of 100 trout has been reduced to seven. "They've eaten 90 fish in three months. I'm the Tesco of the otter world," Simon says.

rainbow trout) and remains sanguine. "If you stock an artificial lake too densely, it will bite you on the bum."

Otter cubs will stay with their mother until they are 12 months old and, around Christmas time, Kuschta will drive away her cubs – European otters, unlike sea otters, are unsocial mammals. It is then that the father, who occupies his own river territory, will return with hopes of mating again with Kuschta.

"It will be sad once the cubs are gone but otters are very solitary animals. If they're not raising a family, they spend less than one per cent of their time with one another."

Whether Kuschta, now aged around five, will produce another litter is uncertain; otter pregnancies last 10 months and 50 per cent of otters are dead by the age of two.

The biggest killer is cars, followed by

like seals, but they don't have blubber to keep warm. Otters have a very high metabolism and they need to eat 10 per cent of their body weight every day to survive," Simon says.

But no matter what happens, his prime mill spot won't stand empty of otters for long. Nature abhors a vacuum and Kuschta will be replaced by another female, possibly even one of her own daughters.

And while habitat destruction remains a concern, the otters' return to our rivers and waterways remains an astonishing recovery story.

"People need to know how precious and unique otters are. But if you're living near a river you're probably not far from one," Simon says.

To order *The Otters' Tale* by Simon Cooper (William Collins) for £14.99 plus p&np call 0844 871 1514 or visit



BEN PHILLIPS