

COUNTRY LIFE®

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EVERY WEEK

The joy of the West Country



Exmoor's totem: the red deer
Smacking a Royal – it must be Real Tennis
Bring me the head of Noël Coward
120 years ago: pencil sharpeners, motor cabs,
aspirin and COUNTRY LIFE



Nature

The Otters' Tale

Simon Cooper

(William Collins, £16.99)

LIKE THE best nature stories, Simon Cooper's *The Otters' Tale* takes us into a different world. It's the world we already occupy, but an internal territory we're unaware of. Below the water, under the riverbank, the swamplands: we pass these corners by. Littered about are the giveaway signatures: coot eggshells, rabbit fur, decimated duckling broods, scales of fish. The otter is the lead player here, a creature 3ft long—but it's invisible.

Mr Cooper's is a classic awakening tale. In the age of innocence, he was a simple trout angler. One day, he was idly fishing when 'a bow wave appeared from nowhere'. The otter universe, in which he became immersed for four years, lacked any innocence. With riveting detail and close-focus scrutiny, he introduces us to a lethal predator.

An otter's whiskers are its hunting organs. They contain nerves and receptors that feed information to the brain. The animals may have poor eyesight, but they have excellent



hearing and can smell underwater. Humankind never recognised otters: they are absent from heraldry, we never ate them and they carry no diseases. Hunted sporadically with dog packs, they existed mostly below the radar.

Mr Cooper allows an otter family free rein in his trout farm beside a 16th-century watermill. Trout eggs and frogspawn are the delicacies, but otters are omnivores. Crunching crayfish, they expel the jelly simultaneously. Lacking fat reserves, otters are vulnerable to cold; their main killer is traffic.

The epic descriptions are of otters' ferocious coupling—the film censor would not pass it—and decimation of their own surplus pups.

This scrupulously accurate, limpidly written book is that rare thing: it teaches, inspires and entertains.

Michael Wigan