

Animal Life along the River Wye By Colin Titcombe

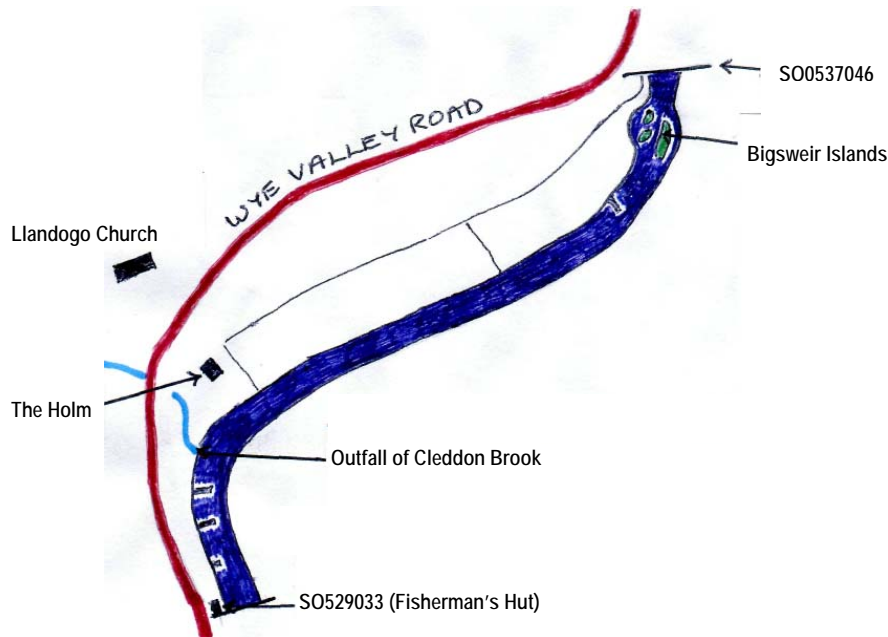
For my 2010 study I have chosen a stretch of the Wye at Llandogo. A river is a living corridor, a corridor along which birds and fish migrate. It is also a habitat of more permanent residence for many animals, but one which is relatively difficult to investigate by us land-based animals.

The stretch of river to be investigated comprises about a mile of varying depth and substratum. In places the river bed is pebbly, in others it is muddy, a mixture which ensures a suitable habitat for a wide range of different species. An additional element at Llandogo is the influence of the tide. Here we come well within the limits of tidal flow and this provides another ingredient in the study of riverlife along this stretch. The tide moves both fauna and flora up and down the valley, so presenting an ever-changing range of species. Regular bird counts vary considerably depending on the state of the tide at the time of the recorder's visit. A bird can be missing from a stretch of river one minute, only to reappear a few minutes later as the tidal flow changes. There are also the changes brought about by neap-tides and spring-tides, and also by flood-waters coming down from the mountainous heartland of Wales. The high spring-tides carry seaweeds in from the Severn Estuary and deposit them along the river-bank at Llandogo. These same tides carry the infant stages of both Eel and Flounder during the months of April and May. It is this ever changing, ever mobile environment which has provided the following records and observations for 2010.

The range of species recorded here include those best described as sub-aquatic (fish and some molluscs etc.), aquatic (some of the birds such as Little Grebe) and riverine (those species spending part of their time in the river and part on the river-bank — most of the species). Terrestrial species are also listed if they have been noted along the river-bank - i.e. the strip of trees, shrubs and rank growth lying between the tenced riverside field and the river itself. These species may include insects such as meadow or woodland butterflies, and also some birds of woodland or scrub habitats.

In the ornithological section a method is used to determine the regularity of occurrence with regard to the typical waterbird species. The number of visits made to the river in 2010 was 176. Mute Swans, for example, were seen on 122 of those visits so my account of the Mute Swan begins with 122/176. The detail of their occurrence then follows.

Acknowledgements: For the provision of information regarding the River Wye and its fishes I am indebted to Mr Roger Brown and Mr John Griffiths, both of Llandogo.



Rough sketch of river surveyed (fishing croys project out into the river from the Gwent bank)

INVERTEBRATES NOTED ALONG THE WYE

Mollusca

Nerite (*Theodoxus fluviatilis*)
Jenkins' Spire Snail (*Potamopyrgus jenkinsi*)
Wandering Snail (*Lymnaea peregra*)
River Limpet (*Ancylus fluviatilis*)
Amber Snail (*Succinea putris*)
Duck Mussel (*Anodonta anatina*)
Depressed river mussel (*Pseudanodonta complanata*)
Horny Orb Snail (*Sphaerium corneum*)

INSECTA

Mayfly (*Ephemera danica*)
Beautiful Agrion (*Calopteryx virgo*)
Banded Agrion (*Calopteryx splendens*)
White-legged Damselfly (*Platycnemis pennipes*)
Azure Damselfly (*Coenagrion puella*)
Common Blue Damselfly (*Enallagma cyathigerum*)
Club-tailed Dragonfly (*Gomphus vulgatissimus*)
Golden-ringed Dragonfly (*Cordulegaster boltonii*)
Dark Bush-cricket (*Pholidoptera griseoptera*)
Alder-fly (*Sialis* sp.)
Green-veined White Butterfly (*Artogeia napi*)
Peacock (*Inachis io*)
Comma (*Polygonia c-album*)
Small Tortoiseshell (*Aglais urticae*)
Ringlet (*Aphantopus hyperantus*)
Hedge Brown (*Pyronia tithonus*)
Meadow Brown (*Maniola jurtina*)
Small Copper (*Lycaena phlaeas*)
Common Blue (*Polyommatus icarus*)
Holly Blue (*Celastrina argiolus*)
Large Skipper (*Ochlodes venatus*)
Snipe-fly (*Rhagio scolopacea*)
Cleg-fly (*Haematopota pluvialis*)
horse-fly (*Chrysops* sp.)
parasite fly (*Tachina fera*)
Black Garden Ant (*Lasius niger*)
Yellow Meadow Ant (*Lasius flavus*)
Common Wasp (*Vespula vulgaris*)
soldier beetle (*Cantharis rustica*)
soldier beetle (*Rhagonicha fulva*)
Cardinal Beetle (*Pyrochroa serraticornis*)
Dock-leaf Beetle (*Gastrophysa viridula*)

Of the above, surprisingly short, list of odonatid species only two were at all plentiful along the river this year - the Banded Agrion and the Club-tailed Dragonfly. The highest count of the former (280) was made on the 6th June between the Bigsweir Islands and the outfall of the Cleddon Brook. The species was seen on the wing from the 5th May to the 11th July. Those 280 were flying insects but of the Club-tailed Dragonflies only five were seen - three actually flying or ready to fly, and two in the process of emerging from the exuvia. This number does not justify my description of 'plentiful' but in this species the exuviae can be found and counted to give a more realistic idea of abundance. This spring, between the 18th May and the 20th June a total of 73 exuviae of this species were collected along this stretch of the Wye (Welsh bank only!).



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Exuviae of Club-Tailed Dragonfly and (Far Right) Golden-Ringed Dragonfly.

It has to be said that a small proportion of these Club-tailed Dragonfly exuviae may have floated down the river from higher up-stream but the majority were found in-situ (i.e. the point at which the emerging teneral left them). Not only was this mysterious species not seen in even reasonable numbers as winged adults, there was no sign of any courtship, mating or egg-laying behaviour. In the case of the Banded Agrions there is a further feature of note - their predation by birds, mostly House Sparrows close to the farmhouse known as The Holm. This predation is made obvious by the discarded wings of the damselflies which are left on the ground after the body has been eaten. Of the remaining species the number of Beautiful Agrion Damselflies seen was very low with just one seen on the 17th May near the Bigsweir Islands, three at Ridingstream Croy on the 25th May and two at Bigsweir Islands on the 3rd June. Numbers of the White-legged Damselfly were even lower with just three being seen.



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Wings of Banded Agrions and other Odonatids after predation by birds (mostly House Sparrows).

The Azure Damselfly was seen just twice (on the 26th June and 11th July) and the Common Blue Damselfly was also only seen in small numbers. The paucity of these two species here probably suggests that the riverine environment does not suit them as well as some other aquatic habitats. The same thing certainly applies to the remaining species on the list - the Golden-ringed Dragonfly. This is typically a species of small brooklets running over upland moors so the discovery of a squashed abdomen of this species on the foot-path near The Holm on the 19th June 2008 came as something of a surprise. However, this year the empty exuvia of this species was found on the river-bank (in-situ) on the 9th June, so proving the breeding of this species here, either in the river or in the Cleddon Brook close to its outfall into the river.

Of the remaining invertebrates, the Yellow Meadow Ants occupy at least five nest-mounds along the top of the river-bank on the Welsh side. These mounds are not adversely affected by the rather infrequent inundations by flood-water. The Common Wasp occurred in a nest constructed amongst Ivy on the side of a small tree at the top of the river-bank.

VERTEBRATES NOTED ALONG THE WYE

FISH

Sea Lamprey (*Petromyzon marinus*)

Twaite Shad (*Alosa fallax*)

Salmon (*Salmo salar*)

Dace (*Leuciscus leuciscus*)

Chub (*Leuciscus cephalus*)

Minnnow (*Phoxinus phoxinus*)

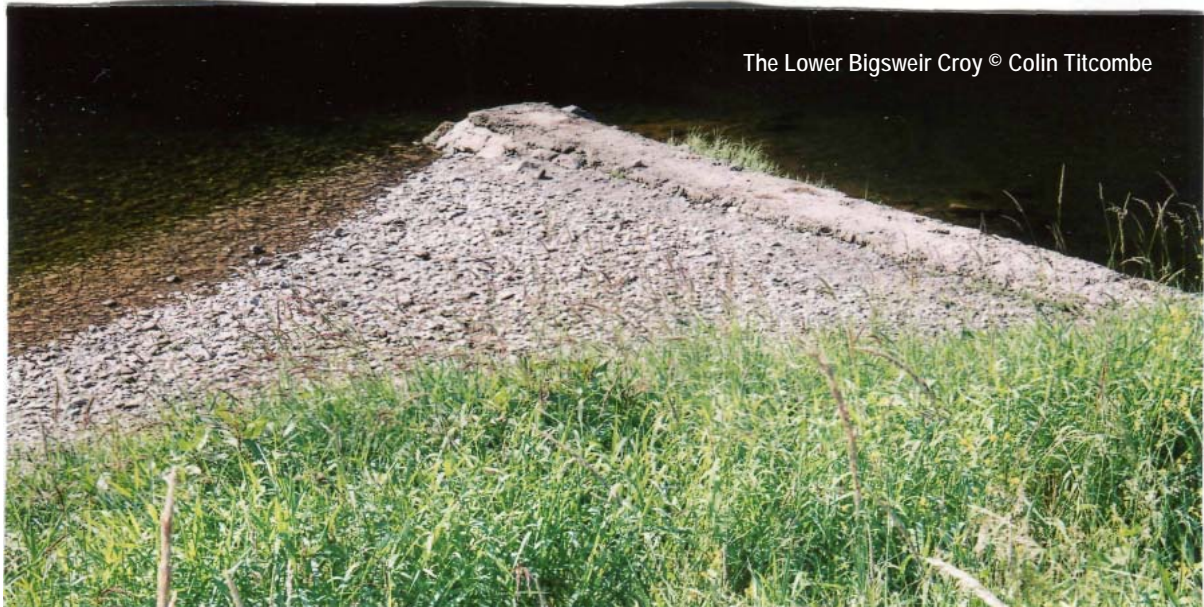
Green Eel (*Anguilla anguilla*)

Three-spined Stickleback (*Gasterosteus aculeatus*)

Flounder (*Platichthys flesus*)

In addition to these listed species at least a further four are likely to occur in the river here. These are the Brown Trout (*Salmo trutta*), Gudgeon (*Gobio gobio*), Stone Loach (*Barbatula barbatula*) and Bullhead (*Cottus gobio*). The first Twaite Shad of the year were reported on the 3rd June. By the 8th June they were seen in greater numbers, and some were apparently taken by anglers on bait intended for Salmon. These fish were returned to the water. The Salmon continues to give cause for concern, as does the Green Eel. Talking to elver fishermen along the river on the evening of the 28th April the numbers being seen were very low and, in some cases, elvers taken in very low numbers (c.50 in one evening) were returned to the river. Later in the year Cormorants were seen to take Green Eels (of c.45 cms in length) on two occasions (29th June and 12th July).

During warm weather in the late spring and early summer dense shoals of small fish were noted in the shallows, especially over the shingle below the lower Bigsweir Fishing Croy. These largely consisted of Minnows and the fry of Dace but other species such as Three-spined Sticklebacks were also seen in small numbers, and the fry of other, larger species, were probably here too. It was about this time (19th June) that small Flounder were also noted in the shallows between this same fishing croy and the Bigsweir Islands. It was difficult to assess numbers but in quite a small area dozens were seen. Talking to local elver fishermen I was informed that the tiny flounders (c.4 cms. in length) were often taken in the elver nets along with the elvers, typically late in the elvering season (towards the end of May). It would appear that the same spring-tides which carry the elvers up-river also transport the infant Flounders at about the same time.



AMPHIBIANS

Common Toad (*Bufo bufo*). The only records obtained of this species was of a Common Toad washed up dead on the river-bank (17th June), and also what are believed to be the calls of this species coming from the river-bank/edge of the river during the spring (28th April, 18th May, 23rd May, 4th June and the 17th June). On the 23rd May, in just one small and sheltered locality, 9 tadpoles were found in the river, and believed to be of this species.

BIRDS

Little Grebe (*Tachybaptus ruficollis*)
Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax carbo*)
Little Egret (*Egretta garzetta*)
Grey Heron (*Ardea cinerea*)
Canada Goose (*Branta canadensis*)
Mute Swan (*Cygnus olor*)
Mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*)
Mandarin Duck (*Aix galericulata*)
Goldeneye (*Bucephala clangula*)
Goosander (*Mergus merganser*)
Common Buzzard (*Buteo buteo*)
Moorhen (*Gallinula chloropus*)
Common Sandpiper (*Actitis hypoleucos*)
Black-headed Gull (*Larus ridibundus*)
Lesser Black-backed Gull (*Larus fuscus*)
Herring Gull (*Larus argentatus*)
Common Gull (*Larus canus*)
Wood Pigeon (*Columba palumbus*)
Swift (*Apus apus*)
Kingfisher (*Alcedo atthis*)
Green Woodpecker (*Picus viridis*)
Great Spotted Woodpecker (*Dendrocopos major*)
Swallow (*Hirundo rustica*)
House Martin (*Delichon urbica*)
Meadow Pipit (*Anthus pratensis*)
Grey Wagtail (*Motacilla cinerea*)
Pied Wagtail (*Motacilla alba*)
Dipper (*Cinclus cinclus*)
Wren (*Troglodytes troglodytes*)
Dunnock (*Prunella modularis*)
Garden Warbler (*Sylvia borin*)
Blackcap (*Sylvia atricapilla*)
Common Whitethroat (*Sylvia communis*)
Robin (*Erithacus rubecula*)
Blackbird (*Turdus merula*)
Song Thrush (*Turdus philomelos*)
Fieldfare (*Turdus pilaris*)
Long-tailed Tit (*Aegithalos caudatus*)
Blue Tit (*Cyanistes caeruleus*)
Great Tit (*Parus major*)
Nuthatch (*Sitta europaea*)
Reed Bunting (*Emberiza schoeniclus*)
Chaffinch (*Fringilla coelebs*)
House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*)
Jay (*Garrulus glandarius*)
Magpie (*Pica pica*)
Carrion Crow (*Corvus corone*)

Of these birds just twenty one are especially linked to the river itself. Of the twenty one mentioned in the list one, the Pied Wagtail, plays so small a part here that it is not included in the species accounts which follow. The rest are mostly there because of the trees and scrub along the river-bank, but five species regularly take advantage of the river itself. Wood Pigeons come down to drink from the rivers edge, Swifts, Swallows and House Martins hawk for insects above the river and Carrion Crows regularly forage along the edge of the river. In addition to this a Common Buzzard was seen carrying a Moorhen across the river in its talons (12th December), presumably one taken from the river-bank. Some birds nest in the riverside trees/scrub/vegetation too. In 2010 definite breeders were Great Spotted Woodpecker and Grey Wagtail; and probable breeders were Reed Bunting (two pairs) and Garden Warbler (two pairs).

Little Grebe (*Tachybaptus ruficollis*) 4/176

The first sighting, of two birds together, came on the 13th November, single birds were then seen on the 7th, 18th and 24th of December.

Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax carbo*) 36/176

Of these sightings some were of birds flying along the river but many were of birds actively fishing. On seven occasions two birds were seen, the maximum number on any one visit until the 27th December when eight birds were seen, seven of them flying up-river as a group.

Little Egret (*Egretta garzetta*) 3/176

All sightings (made on the 23rd July, 24th July and the 14th September) are thought to be of the same first year bird.

Grey Heron (*Ardea cinerea*) 5/176

Sightings of this species were made between the 7th July and the 27th December. Only a single bird was present each time.

Canada Goose (*Branta canadensis*) 2/176

On the 6th June a pair of Canada Geese + a large gosling, were seen on the lower Bigsweir croy. The following day the pair were seen further down the river but there was no sign of the gosling. They were not seen again.

Mute Swan (*Cygnus olor*) 122/176

Mute Swans occupy this stretch of the river throughout the year but during the winter months their numbers tend to be much lower, often just single birds. During the summer of 2010 the highest number of swans noted here was twelve (6 pairs on the 1st August) with eleven being seen on the 24th July and the 24th August, and ten on the 27th June, 20th July, 29th July and 31st July.

Mute Swans did not breed along this stretch of the river this year but some attempts were made early on. The problem the swans have here is the tidal regime, the higher tides can cover most suitable sites except for some on the highest parts of the Bigsweir Islands where they have bred successfully in recent years. During the autumn immature birds move into this part of the river, either with parents or on their own. Two immature birds appeared on the 11th October but on the 16th October an adult bird was seen driving them away. One immature was present on occasions until the end of the year. On the 13th November a pair with three immatures appeared in the area of the Ridingstream Weir. They were exceptionally tame but they were not seen again.

Mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*) 152/176

Mallard occur on this stretch of the Wye throughout the year and are to be seen on almost every visit. During all but the 'eclipse period' they occur in mixed-sex groups, distinct pairs or in trios. The trios, as identified here, always comprise two drakes and a duck. Breeding takes place in the area generally, and the new broods brought down onto the river by the ducks.

In 2010 the first brood of ducklings (just three) were seen on the 4th May. On the 11th May a duck was seen with nine ducklings. By the 3rd June some ducklings had developed to the 'flapper' stage (young birds of the year almost adult size but lacking developed flight feathers and thus incapable of flight). Then, on the 19th June, a duck appeared with eight very small ducklings. Because of predation and various comings and goings it is difficult to assess the number of broods seen but it is possible to give a bare minimum and this year that bare minimum was six broods, although some of these may have moved into the area from elsewhere. During the summer months the Mallards acquire eclipse plumage when the difference between ducks, drakes and immature birds is not so obvious, especially at distance. In 2010 the first signs of eclipse plumage began to show as early as the 5th June, and the full plumage had returned by the 9th October. In terms of abundance the highest number of Mallard seen, rather predictably, was during the later part of the summer when 89 were counted.

Mandarin Duck (*Aix galericulata*) 10/176

The Mandarins first appeared on the 27th July - a single female. A female was again seen on the 1st August and on the 24th August a drake was present in eclipse plumage. By the 18th October Mandarin drakes had been seen on a further four visits and by now they (or it) had regained full breeding plumage. A drake was seen on a further three visits during the autumn of 2010.

Goldeneye (*Bucephala clangula*) 4/176

The only sightings of this species came during the cold weather of December when, on the 9th, two females were present, seemingly in the company of a single Mute Swan. These birds appeared to stay for the rest of the month but were generally seen separately.

Goosander (*Mergus merganser*) 35/176

Goosanders occupied this stretch of the Wye in 2010 from January through to late March, and returned in September (2 females on the 6th). During the autumn their numbers increased with the maximum recorded on one visit being nine on the 11th November (4drakes and 5 ducks). However, more were present in the area overall because, while the maximum number of drakes recorded was four, the maximum for females was seven (on the 2nd December).

Moorhen (*Gallinula chloropus*) 38/176

Like the Goosanders, the presence of Moorhens on this stretch of the Wye also appears to be seasonal with the birds disappearing towards the end of March and returning again in the post-breeding period. The first post-breeding bird was seen on the 21st July. This situation, however, used not to be the case for local residents can remember Moorhens breeding regularly along the river here. The difference today would appear to be the increased tidal range which, to a degree, also affects the nesting of the Mute Swans. When the Moorhens return, post-breeding, they probably move down from breeding areas nearby or higher up the river. Later in the year some Moorhens may arrive from Continental Europe.

In 2010 the highest number seen on any one visit was four, this number being noted on the 9th January, 30th November and the 21st December, but with so much cover available along the river-bank the actual number present is probably much higher. In fact, a Moorhen taken by a Common Buzzard on the 12th December means that the bare minimum of birds here up to that point is likely to have been five.

Common Sandpiper (*Actitis hypoleucas*) 2/176

This species moves through this part of the Wye on passage. This year they were only seen on the return passage - 3rd July and 29th July.

Black-headed Gull (*Larus ridibundus*) 1/176

In 2010 this species was only seen along this stretch of the Wye for a very brief period on the 3rd November. Just down the river at Tintern however, they are present for much of the year.

Lesser Black-backed Gull (*Larus fuscus*) 9/176

In 2010 sightings of this gull were confined to the spring and summer (15th May - 6th September). The largest number seen on any one visit was just two on the 30th July.

Herring Gull (*Larus argentatus*) 27/176

Most sightings of this species were made during the spring and summer with the first on the 17th April. However, two sightings were made in December (on the 1st and the 21st). The largest number seen at any one time was three on the 12th May.

Common Gull (*Larus canus*) 1/176

The only sighting of this species along the river this year was made on the 30th July.

Kingfisher (*Alcedo atthis*) 14/176

In 2010 a Kingfisher was first seen on the 29th June -presumably just after breeding which probably took place further up-river. The largest number seen on any one visit was just two on the 5th July.

Grey Wagtail (*Motacilla cinerea*) 12/176

Although seen on so few occasions in 2010 a pair nested amongst the rocks on the Gwent bank in the lower part of the stretch below Llandogo. Only one youngster successfully fledged and this was first seen on the 2nd July. The largest number of Grey Wagtails seen on any one visit was six on the 10th July.

Dipper (*Cinclus cinclus*) 6/176

At one time the Dipper was said to be a regular inhabitant of the Cleddon Brook and River Wye here at Llandogo. Sadly this is no longer the case and the only sightings made here in 2010 were just six between the 30th September and the 30th November.

Reed Bunting (*Emberiza schoeniclus*) 4/176

This species breeds regularly along the Gwent bank of this stretch of the Wye, mostly in the riverside vegetation near the Bigsweir Islands. Breeding was first noted here in the spring of 2003, again in 2004 and again in 2008. In reality it seems likely that breeding takes place here every year. During the spring/summer of 2010 breeding probably took place at two sites along this stretch of the river.

MAMMALS

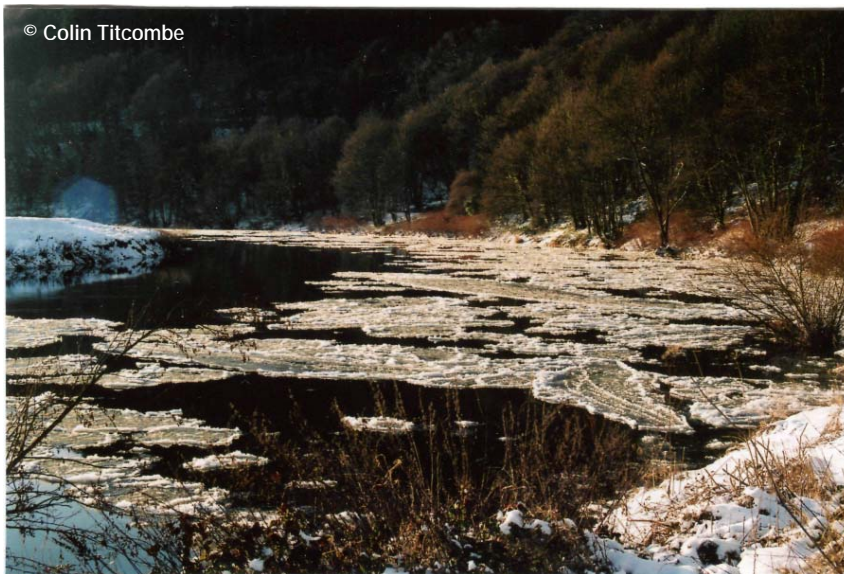
The only 'aquatic' mammal noted here in 2010 was the Otter (*Lutra lutra*). Sign (principally footprints) of this species was noted on many occasions during that course of the year but actual sightings were only made in the period from the 5th September to the end of the year. During this time Otters were seen as follows –

5.9.10 - 2 Otters
22.9.10 - 3 Otters
30.11.10 - 1 Otter
2.12.10 - 1 Otter
14.12.10 - 2 Otters
24.12.10 - 1 Otter

Most authors refer to the Otter as being nocturnal or mostly nocturnal. All of my sightings in 2010 were made in the daytime which suggests to me that the Otter of today, not being subject to hunting or other forms of human aggression, has become diurnal, or at least, just as much diurnal as it is nocturnal.

One other point of interest should be made here. During my visits to the Wye this year evidence of Mink (*Mustela vison*), either sightings or sign, was totally lacking. This would appear to corroborate opinions made elsewhere that Otter presence has a limiting effect on the activities of Mink.

The otter noted on the 24.12.10 was fishing among the ice floes shown in the photograph



The River Wye at Llandogo (2010)



The River Wye at Llandogo in flood (Winter 2010)



The River Wye at Llandogo (December 2010)



Ice floes on the River Wye at Llandogo (December 2010)



The Bigsweir Islands



The Fisherman's Hut



The Lower Bigsweir Croy



Ridingstream weir and croy



In December 2010, ice along the river bank was an obvious indicator of tidal range on the river Wye at Llandogo. The maximum range of tide here at present (equinoctial tides) is said to be c. 4.5 metres.

