



Jules Hudson

COUNTRY ESCAPE

A spot of otter bother leaves Jules dismayed and delighted in equal measure, but it also prompts him to think about the future of this elusive waterborne mammal

A few days ago, our lovely neighbour Tim appeared at our kitchen door keen to know if we'd lost any fish. Tim's garden would easily grace the cover of any gardening magazine and, complete with abundant borders and immaculate lawns, at its centre is a large raised fish pond full of beautiful koi carp. By contrast our pond is less formal but twice the size, and over the years we've shared our passion for ponds and our fish.

In reply, I said I didn't think we had, but, as I filled the kettle for our customary morning coffee, I looked out across the garden, and there at the edge of the pond was what could only have been the corpse of a lovely red-and-white koi. As we gingerly approached, its terrible fate was all too clear. Half eaten, its tail and stomach had been devoured in what seemed a frenzy, and I was horrified. "That's nothing," said Tim. "Come with me," and so with reservation I followed him back to his enchanting garden. The scene before us was macabre. Strewn about the bowling green lawn, were the bodies of several magnificent fish that had met the same fate. Like CSI sleuths, we traced scattered piles of scales that showed where each victim had been dragged and then partially devoured as we sought to map the awful action.

But who or what was the culprit? We quickly discounted cats and dogs. Whatever had ravaged his pond was clearly an expert with form. A couple of birthdays ago, Tim had received a wildlife camera capable of recording at night. This was its moment of glory. We deployed it with the determination of MI5 agents, having read the instructions halfway through. Once the camera was set, we retired to see what the night would bring.

A couple of days later, following a few teething troubles and having now read all the instructions thoroughly, Tim appeared triumphant at my kitchen door. I hurried over to review the footage, glimpsing on my way yet more carnage around his pond. Sure enough, in a series of grainy, nocturnal images was the culprit... Open-mouthed, we stared in wonder at ghostly pictures of the most accomplished and elusive of waterborne thieves: the villain of the piece was an otter.

Despite the carnage and our rapidly dwindling fish stock, which over just a few nights had dropped from nearly 40 to nearer four, if I'm honest we were a little thrilled

to have seen such a secretive creature on our doorstep. We turned to the internet to find out what might be done to end the slaughter without harming our troublesome Tarka.

It turns out that 30 years ago, otter numbers had declined so severely there was a chance they could become extinct in Britain within a generation. Excessive use of harmful pesticides was polluting our rivers and forcing the otter population further west to the point of no return. But in 1981 the otter became a protected species. Pesticides and their use have changed and the result has been that, not only has the health of our rivers improved, numbers of otters have soared and they're now seen in virtually every major river in England and Wales, with the notable exception of Kent. The internet is also alive with reports of otters running amuck through fish farms.

As these creatures are at the top of the freshwater food chain, their numbers are a great barometer for the overall condition of a river. We live half-a-mile from the Wye, far enough I thought to mean the chances of seeing an otter – or indeed anything else that may live down there – in our garden were remote. But given reports the Wye may now be at full otter capacity, it begs a question as to what their future may hold, and why they're hunting further afield. We had no choice but to let ours continue to ravage Tim's pond to the point where sadly there are now no fish left at all. Despite having the means to record his efforts, there's nothing we can do to stop him, and we certainly wouldn't dream of harming him.

But clearly there's a temptation for those with greater financial or sporting means to tackle the problem head on, posing a great risk to otters. So perhaps now's the time to start a conversation about how best to manage our otter population, such that it can sustain itself within its natural habitat. Otherwise I fear the beautiful otter may become a victim of its own success, and given its unique status, that really would be a crime. *J*

JULES HUDSON was born in Essex but stayed in Wales after studying archeology at Lampeter University. He has worked in television since 1996 and is a member of the *Countryfile* team, but is best-known as the leading face of *Escape To The Country*. He moved back across the Border in 2012, to Herefordshire.

You can follow Jules on Twitter @thejuleshudson, or visit his website at www.juleshudson.com

