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The paper considers otter hunting and wildfowling in England between 1945 and 1970, showing how arguments over human conduct in relation to the animal were linked to scientific studies of populations, moral arguments over cruelty and the abilities of field sports to restyle themselves as modern. If wildfowling restyles itself as a new conservationist practice, otter hunting is increasingly regarded as a form of landed barbarism. Detailed studies of Herefordshire and Norfolk are drawn upon alongside national debates. The paper emphasizes the effects of geography in debates over such practices, extending work on animal geographies through the study of animal landscapes.

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Geographies of the animal

On 19 December 1968 Stewart Linsell wrote in Country Life of ‘Otters by moonlight’: ‘In September I spent several nights at the period of full moon beside the marsh near the famous East bank at Cley’. Unlike the autumn ‘hordes of bird-watching pilgrims’ at the North Norfolk coast, Linsell was after otters, though by day the ‘ceaseless coming and going of bird-watchers’ gave little hope of seeing one. Linsell wanted to observe:

Hunters of this beautiful and playful animal have come under a lot of fire, and rightly so. One wonders what justification they can have for driving our most beautiful of wild animals to extinction, when on occasions it is capable of giving the observer such enormous pleasure.

Under a harvest moon, Linsell watched five at play:

For the next hour I was to witness events which if seen by these ‘sportsmen’, these otter-hunters, would I am sure ram home even to them just what wonderful creatures they are hunting to extinction.

Linsell lost the otters as they headed into the marsh: ‘They were gone, and I left the East bank wondering if I should ever see wild otters at play again’ (Linsell 1968, 1638–9).

This story of human and animal conduct contains many of the key themes of this paper: the strategies by which humans meaningfully encounter the animal, the different attention given to birds and otters, the senses of cultural distinction cultivated through nature, the morality of killing, the understanding of animal populations, the pleasures they offer. The otter is one focus of the paper, wildfowl another, and Cley marsh is one significant location in these animal geographies. Stories of otters and wildfowl here provide contrasting ways into the cultures of nature in England between 1945 and 1970; the paper draws on work carried out at a national scale and on detailed studies of Herefordshire and Norfolk. Working through wildfowl and otters in turn, and using the contrast between wildfowling and otter hunting to draw out the specificity of both, the paper seeks to extend work on animal geographies (Wolch and Emel 1998; Philo and Wilbert 2000), where the killing of animals for sport has become subject to cultural geographic enquiry (Emel 1998; Ryan 2000; Woods 2000). Wolch et al. (2004) identify three themes in recent animal geographic work: human identity and animal subjectivity, animals and place, and animals in the moral landscape. Our study moves across these, considering human identity in relation
to definitions of the quarry’s character, showing places contested through the protection and/or killing of animals, and addressing moral dispute around human conduct. Throughout we seek to demonstrate the constitutive nature of geography in configuring human–animal relations. In attending to moral geographies we follow Jones’ emphasis on the ‘geography of the spaces and places of encounter’ (2000, 268) and the spatialities informing debate; the labelling of animals as in or out of place, the implications of ethical invisibility or visibility connected to the status of animals as individualized or faceless others, and the consideration of lives lived in other spaces such as water, soil and air. To illustrate one theme, the issue of animals as individualized or faceless plays differently in wildfowling and otter hunting. Wildfowl are in general treated as an aggregate migratory body inhabiting a different element, encountered via gun or binoculars at a physical and ethical distance. Otters by contrast are often individualized, lent personality, and observed and hunted through close pursuit and intimate visual or (through hounds) olfactory engagement. The intimacy of the kill raises excitement in the hunter and fury in those condemning the practice. The culminating presentation of the otter ‘mask’ marks, however, a practice which both individualizes the pursued animal yet suggests a general species battle; the body of the pursued otter is ultimately rendered faceless.

Lorimer has shown how issues of land management, self-fashioning, class politics and styles of animal death must be considered together to understand deerstalking in the interwar Scottish Highlands, taking seriously the complex ‘hegemonic, conservative geographies of field sports and sporting estates’ (2000, 406). We similarly highlight the landscapes through which practices are performed, and the importance of local geographies and narratives of history in shaping present action. Through emphasizing animal landscapes our study contributes to broader geographical argument concerning cultures of nature, whether animal or otherwise. Whatmore’s study of ‘hybrid geographies’ (2002), in part concerned with ‘topologies of wildlife’, asserts the value of a geographical sensibility refusing the a priori separation of nature and culture, attending to the hybrids which belie such a distinction, and assessing the operation of such a separation in the historical geographies of human–nonhuman relations. Whatmore presents her studies of wildlife as ‘fleshing out the place of animal body-subjects in the geographies of wildlife conservation’ (2002, 5–6), and in pursuing a relational ethics asks ‘how the “we” of ethical communities is to be renegotiated on account of its heterogeneous, inter-corporeal composition’ (2002, 166). Here we emphasize how the ‘we’ of such communities has long been the subject of reflexivity on the part of those engaged in various human–animal practices, and in considering such complex moral geographies of conduct echo Whatmore’s suspicions of those offering hybridity as a ‘departure from patterns of being that went before’ (2002, 165).

We seek also to extend the approach of Hybrid geographies (Whatmore 2002) through attending to the geographies of nature language. Given Whatmore’s stress on geography, one point for her departure is curiously ageographical. While Whatmore problematizes the term ‘wilderness’ (2002, 9–11), she does not address its specific North American cultural contours, and the historical geographies of its critique. Such issues are pertinent to the material considered here. In England ‘wilderness’ as a term for nature has been queried for a century, partly by conservationists and ecologists, sometimes in imperial contexts (Anker 2001). Nature conservation has thereby developed through acute reflexivity concerning artifice and the natural. The humanly shaped character of English landscape has been asserted, in part through historical geography (Baker and Harley 1973) and historical ecology (Rackham 1986), indeed the slogan of twentieth-century English nature conservation might well have been ‘we have never been wilderness’. That is not to say that the wild lacks an English currency, but it is a reflexively complex one. Thus in the wildfowling considered here, the ‘wild’ figures in the migratory life of the fowl (with humans seeking to channel this into habitual visits to observational or shooting spots via habitat provision), in the self-fashioning exposure of the fowler to wild weather, and in narratives of shooting as connected to primitively wild human conduct. Yet at the same time wildfowling is self-evidently not ‘wild’ in the sense of being beyond human artifice, working as it does through shooting technologies, concealment techniques, fowling etiquette and pool excavation to tempt birds. Wild life, describing human or nonhuman conduct, carries geographically specific cultural freight.

We also supplement Whatmore’s hybrid geographical language of networks and topologies through an emphasis on animal landscapes, and
Animal landscapes

the issue here is in part that of the effects of theoretical language. If questions of enactment and affect are to be taken seriously (Dewsbury et al. 2002), they must also be asked of academic work, and the geoaesthetics of academic geography – its forms of writing, its styles of thought – should be considered (Matless 1997). Whatmore seeks to set her work at one remove from both the ‘technical inflection’ of actor-network theory studies and the ‘visceral preoccupations’ of feminist work (2002, 36), yet our reading of ‘visceral preoccupations’ of feminist work (2002, 258) of the world in question to produce a Foucauldian genealogy. In problematizing judgements of the natural and wild our account parallels The intemperate rainforest in a number of ways. Firstly the practices examined (hunting, shooting, photography, protest, watching, other leisure etc.) and the methods employed to reach such material (public and private archival work, publication, oral history, field study) echo Braun’s account. Secondly we follow Braun in pursuing a genealogy of how objects attain political, economic and aesthetic legibility. Thirdly we similarly attend to the vital place of representation in human life, while moving from any narrow sense of representation as distanced and detached. In our own writing, and in the written, spoken and corporeal languages of others through which we can reach material, we follow Braun’s argument that:

Precisely because nature is something that must be represented (it cannot simply speak for itself), the act of representation becomes that much more important, for it necessarily constructs that which it speaks for. What ‘deconstruction’ teaches is that there is no way around this. (Braun 2002, 260)

While the full debates around otters and wildfowl between 1945 and 1970 are beyond this paper, they take place through a particular historical and geographical conjunction of science, sport, class and the modern which requires brief attention at the outset. With the formation of the Nature Conservancy in 1948, the development of county naturalist trusts, and the publication of the Collins ‘New Naturalist’ series, nature conservation made itself modern, an official professional practice marked out from a valued amateur heritage (Lowe and Goyder 1983; Marren 1995; Matless 1998; Sheail 1998). Amateur naturalism, especially significant at the county scale, was itself restyled as rigorous and scientific (Watkins et al. 2003). In such a context the close historical relationship between nature concern and field sports came under strain. Could the latter be compatible with the former? Many powerful figures and institutions in nature conservation did not oppose killing for pleasure on moral grounds, or if they did they put objections to one side as not the concern of scientific conservation, operating through a separation of science and morality embodying a scientific morality of its own. As in earlier periods, field sports could claim modern credibility via a contribution to scientific data (Lorimer 2000), but wildfowling and otter hunting here displayed very different capacities to claim the modern, one reinventing itself as a modern sport, the other presented as set in archaic ways.

These geographies of death and the modern are also geographies of class. Various Englands clash over the fate of wildfowl and otters, an England coming to nature through the media of radio and the emerging popular television (Wilson 1992; Davies 2000), and an England of field sports and landed establishment. Field sports are promoted as allying county elites, often with metropolitan connections, and the rural working class, while objections to sport appear the concern of an urban middle class, whose membership of local conservation bodies becomes more significant in this period. Different constituencies compete for moral and financial influence within single organizations, and cultures of nature shift. One twist here is that the landed elite helped foster the production of popular televisual nature through programmes such as ‘Survival’; impeccably establishment figures such as the Duke of Edinburgh promoted a popular culture of nature. By broadcasting their cultural authority, nature elites sought to maintain that authority, though not without tension. Such elite-popular processes also make this story indicative
of moves to a post-imperial English and British identity. The practices under discussion, and many individuals involved, were shaped by an imperial alliance of nature appreciation and sport (Mackenzie 1988), furthered in the twentieth century through the promotion of nature conservation in Africa and elsewhere (Neumann 1995), and adapted post-1945 through bodies such as the World Wildlife Fund, founded in 1961 (Huxley 1993, 248–62). Key figures in the WWF – Max Nicholson, Peter Scott, Aubrey Buxton, the Duke of Edinburgh – feature in this paper. If our focus is on events within England, such connections indicate the refashioning of a nature elite with interests far beyond, whose cultural authority flowed from an ability to move between locations and scales. The animal landscapes considered here entail an end of empire story in the English counties.

Wildfowl and wildfowling

In this section of the paper we examine national debates concerning wildfowl and wildfowling which serve to produce a ‘new wildfowler’, before considering the geographies of wildfowl at Cley, seeking in part to demonstrate the value of studying specific animal landscapes in their local detail.

National wildfowl and the new wildfowler

Wildfowl and wildfowling were subject to post-war legislative change. The 1954 Protection of Birds Act, superseding laws accruing since the 1869 Sea Birds Preservation Act, afforded year-round protection to all wild birds, their eggs and nests, other than those on specific schedules, where a close season operated for some species (Gow 1961). Extension of legislation accompanied scientific surveying techniques. Wildfowl Counts were established in 1947 by the Wildfowl Inquiry Committee of the British Section of the International Council for Bird Preservation, led from 1952 by a Central Organiser, GL Atkinson-Willes, and administered from 1954 with funding from the Nature Conservancy by artist and conservationist Peter Scott’s Wildfowl Trust, based at Slimbridge on the Severn (Atkinson-Willes 1961 1963; Huxley 1993). Exercises in bird survey were themselves held to generate good citizenship (Macdonald 2002). James Fisher envisaged a national indexing through county societies and schoolchildren ‘trained in observation and note-taking’, with ‘Bird scientists . . . able . . . to conduct a great Mass Observation of birds’:

. . . perhaps one day, not very far ahead, some zoologist may press a button in London or Oxford or Cambridge or Aberystwyth or Edinburgh, a machine will hum, and a stack of cards giving all the records of crossbill irruptions in East Anglia, or the history of the pied flycatcher in Wales, or the migrations of the wood-pigeon in Scotland, will fall into a tray. (Fisher 1946, 205–6)

Wildfowl counts, involving several thousand people, informed the 1963 Nature Conservancy survey Wildfowl in Great Britain. Director-General Max Nicholson’s foreword emphasized science underpinning conservation, survey results were summarized by region and species, and the influence of agriculture, artificial habitat and population control described. Paintings and drawings by Peter Scott appeared throughout, providing an official visual grammar of wildfowl and wildfowling, with species offered in profile, flight and variations of plumage. For those without moral objection to shooting, such lovingly detailed images could also be a guide to targets. For others though the idea that one could both love birds and shoot them was absurd. Tension over shooting had increased in the 1950s, with the sporting lobby concerned that the 1954 Act indicated a conservationist desire to restrict or prohibit wildfowling.

At national level, reconciliation of wildfowling and conservation was pursued through formal and informal liaison, and a styling of a ‘New Wildfowler’ aligning science and sport, shooting and modern life. After 1954 Max Nicholson hosted informal ‘tea parties’ at the Nature Conservancy headquarters attended by representatives of the Wildfowlers’ Association of Great Britain and Ireland (WAGBI), the Wildfowl Trust and others, cultivating a masculine clubbish consensual authority out of previous antagonism:

There seems something agreeably English in resorting to tea parties to bring about, with complete success, a peaceful revolution through a meeting of minds when several eminent Committees and the combined efforts of both Houses of Parliament had failed to produce a workable means for naturalists and wildfowlers to get along together. (Nicholson 1961, 216)

The tea parties were formalized as the Nature Conservancy’s Wildfowl Conservation Committee:

When the two sides got to know each other better they found, perhaps to their surprise, that they had much in common. The ornithologists began to realise that the average wildfowler was a responsible citizen who shot
moderately for sport, ‘the pot’ or both. He often had a deep interest in wild life and was opposed to excessive shooting and constant disturbance of wildfowl habitats. The wildfowlers learnt that the true conservationists had no wish to prevent their sport but wanted to ensure that stocks of wildfowl did not become permanently depleted. Everyone agreed that only the selfish shooter and the extreme protectionist belonged to minorities with which no compromise was possible. (Nature Conservancy/WAGBI/Wildfowl Trust 1970, 5)

True conservationists and true wildfowlers define themselves against respective extremists.

In 1961 WAGBI produced The new wildfowler (Sedgewick et al. 1961), projecting a compact between shooting and conservation, achieved in part by making traditional practice modern. Scott provided a preface and dustjacket painting, The Mallard Flight, of ducks at sunset, silhouettes, beautiful targets, coming to a lake. The new wildfowler emits self-congratulation on a self-regulating movement achieving a modern maturity, combining social organization, individual conduct within new law, up to date equipment, and a sensibility seeing no contradiction, indeed a necessary ecological and political alliance, between wildfowling and conservation. Chapters covered identification, migration, equipment, clothing, decoys, dogs, different locations, conservation, surveys, diseases, vermin, taxidermy and cookery (by the only female contributor, Pamela Harrison, and including ‘Curry Sauce for Curlew’). A final chapter considered ‘Famous Wildfowlers of the Past’, pioneer figures whose appearance from a very different era underlined the sense of sporting evolution. We now consider the new wildfowler among birds and other humans at a site of national reputation in Norfolk.

Cley

Wildfowling was made new at sites such as Cley, within 25 miles of ‘prime habitat’ along the North Norfolk coast:

Within this area of about 700 acres the habitat varies widely from fresh water pools with reed-beds and rough grazing on the inner marsh to salt or brackish lagoons and open mud along the sea-wall. (Atkinson-Willes 1963, 105)

There is a complex internal geography at Cley concerning the control of marsh and seaward shingle bank by different organizations and individuals; wildfowling occurred alongside ornithological research and leisure birdwatching. Cley Marshes was the first nature reserve established by the Norfolk Naturalists’ Trust (NNT) in 1926 (Figure 1). The adjacent Arnold’s Marsh, beyond the East Bank, was bequeathed to the National Trust by E. C. Arnold in 1949 and leased to the NNT from 1962 (Norfolk Naturalists Trust 1968 1970). The NNT reserve was maintained by Warden Billy Bishop. The Nature Conservancy noted in 1963:

The primary object of the reserve being to provide a resting place for birds on spring and autumn passage, it has hitherto been the policy to let the shooting rights for a limited number of days each winter. This has now ceased and in future the place will be kept as a private refuge. (Atkinson-Willes 1963, 105)

Much of the reserve was declared a statutory Bird Sanctuary in 1966, with shooting prohibited and hides constructed, though wildfowling continued in surrounding areas, and the designation of sanctuary did not imply objection to shooting on behalf of the NNT.

Wildfowling at Cley must be understood in relation to a local culture of ornithological research, which carried different relations to bird populations and different styles of being human. Cley Bird Observatory was established by ornithologist and artist R. A. Richardson in 1949, with a funnel-shaped ‘Heligoland’ net trap set on the beach, and further traps established on Walsey Hills on County Council-owned land in summer 1951 (Cocker 2001, 74–94; Taylor 2002). The Observatory operated from 1949 to 1963 as a ringing station, publishing a Check-list of the birds of Cley and neighbouring Norfolk parishes in 1962. Richardson’s list exemplifies what Law and Lynch term ‘the descriptive organisation of seeing’, his work at Cley showing the ‘reflexive relation between the literary phenomenon of the list and the embodied and interactional performance of observation and representation’ (Law and Lynch 1988, 270). Richardson described:

an area as renowned for its ornithological tradition as any other comparable unit of country in the British Isles. For nearly 140 years successive generations of naturalists have faithfully recorded their observations and made possible the compilation of this list of 300 species of which 123 have bred (*) and all but 25 (†) have been noted actually within the Cley parish boundary. (Richardson 1962, 1)

Richardson noted rarity, seasonality and breeding location. Annual Reports included Richardson’s ‘Warden’s Report’, lists of birds rung and recovered
that year and since 1949, and monthly migration
details. Richard Fitter, for whom Richardson acted
as book illustrator, introduced the Report for 1961:

I suppose few even in other parts of Norfolk would
question the title of the coast between Blakeney Point
and Salthouse to be the best bird-watching pitch in the
country. . . . Few bird watchers consider their year
complete unless they have paid at least one visit to
Cley. (Cley Bird Observatory 1962, 1)

Fitter recalls of Richardson: ‘I used to go there
quite frequently . . . He was usually to be found
sitting at the far end of the bank with a crowd of
young people round him listening to what he had
to say’. The East Bank and the adjacent rough
grazing and pools of Arnold’s Marsh were a key
site due in part to limited NNT reserve access.

The charismatic Richardson focused a new cul-
ture of ornithology at Cley, with its own internal
hierarchies and rivalries (cf. Liep 2001). In his
account of the birding ‘tribe’, Mark Cocker recalls
Richardson’s role and subsequent ‘legend’ (Cocker
2001, 77), producing Cley as an obligatory passage
point for the fledgling birdwatcher before his death
in 1977. Cocker imagines a view from space of
committed ‘twitchers’ moving across 1970s Britain:
‘if you could have watched each trajectory over the
decade, almost all would have intersected at one
point. That place was the East Bank at Cley’ (2001,
72). Relations between Richardson’s Observatory
and the NNT were, however, not without tension,
reflecting differences between a landowning,
shooting estate culture and those pursuing scientific
and/or leisure ornithology. While the Observatory

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**Figure 1 Cley Marshes**

![Figure 1 Cley Marshes](image)
happily caught birds for ringing, the emphasis was on unharmed release, and researchers including Richardson had an antipathy to shooting. In 1959 the Observatory was allowed to mist-net and ring waders on the reserve, but in 1960 the NNT denied permission. Richardson noted:

I have to report with much regret that the active cooperation envisaged between the Norfolk Naturalists Trust and the Observatory has not been forthcoming and we have been denied access to the small outlying marsh where we had hoped to mist-net migrant waders outside the breeding season. ... For our part we continue to make available our entire records for publication in the Trust's annual Norfolk Bird Report. (Cley Bird Observatory 1961, 5)

Richardson and NNT reserve warden Billy Bishop are symbolically different figures in this period; Richardson independent and cosmopolitan, moving to Cley in 1949, ‘invariably dressed in black leathers or denims’ (Taylor 2002, 114), and speeding around the locality on his motorcycle; Bishop a local fowler and Warden from 1937, appearing a deferential custodian. Figures emblematic of English cultural difference come to stand for different versions of a place. Bishop was happy to facilitate shooting, recalling wildfowling at dawn on 19 October 1961 with holders of shooting rights on the eastern reserve: ‘Colonel Blount and Captain Buxton phoned instructions to me to meet them at the Long Drift at dawn and to bring my gun with me. I can hardly remember a more filthy morning in terms of weather or a more beautiful one for wildfowling’ (Bishop and Bishop 1996, 43). The NNT as conservationist landholder happily accommodated regulated sport in the post-war period. Local wildfowling was organized from 1954 through the Blakeney and District Wildfowlers’ Association (BDWA). Bishop remembered this as a far cry from the old free-for-all days. Nevertheless, supervision of this sort is an excellent thing. Wildfowling clubs control their members well and prevent the irresponsible types usually referred to as ‘marsh cowboys’ from damaging conditions for other fowlers and, more important, the fowl. (Bishop and Bishop 1996, 30)

The cultural figure of the marsh cowboy informed debates on shooting elsewhere, including the free shooting on the tidal estuary of Breydon Water near Great Yarmouth. Norfolk County Council’s Wild Birds Protection Committee were reported in 1963 as noting: ‘It was essential to put a stop to indiscriminate shooting by “marsh cowboys or teddies”’. Bad shooting and aggressive working-class youth culture are culturally equated. The legitimacy of human conduct turns on styles of being human in different environments.

The modern wildfowler also departs from archaic precedent. The local gunners described in books such as Cley taxidermist H. N. Pashley’s (1925) Notes on the birds of Cley, Norfolk become men of a consciously different era, and as local non-elite shooting is newly organized so elite visitors are restyled. Bernard Bishop, son of Billy and himself Warden from 1979, recalls:

The final passing of the day of the Gentleman Gunners came in 1948 when Gilmour Richards, the son of one of the better-known old Collectors, dressed in thigh boots, tweeds, cap and sidebag, came down in September as his father had done for many years, and was taken down to Blakeney Harbour by my father to relive once again something which he knew his father and mine had enjoyed. (Bishop and Bishop 1996, 26)

The outlook of E. C. Arnold, donor of Arnold’s Marsh, who died in 1949, became something to set at a cultural distance in public discourse. Billy Bishop recalled: ‘When I first became Warden of Cley, E. C. Arnold used to sit in a boat in the middle of this area and shoot at every uncommon wader that passed’ (Bishop and Bishop 1996, 10–11; Arnold 1940). The passing of such figures did not, however, mark the end of gentlemanly shooting, rather the new wildfowler had a new gentlemanly style. Shooting rights over eastern sections of the reserve were leased until 1963, and rights over the neighbouring Salthouse marshes were taken by Aubrey, later Lord Buxton, a key national figure in nature campaigns and in wildlife filming through his Anglia Television ‘Survival’ series from 1960, and resident at nearby Stiffkey. When elements within the NNT moved to ban shooting in the late 1950s, Buxton stressed his aim in taking the rights was:

to prevent indiscriminate disturbance ... We both want to prevent indiscriminate disturbance on the Council marshes. If I had not secured them for the Trust this would have meant several tenants pooping off continuously in a vital area.8

Buxton’s guests included the Duke of Edinburgh, an important patron of nature conservation through the Council of Nature and the ‘Countryside in 1970’ conferences from 1963, and part of a network whereby nature conservation gained Establishment
influence via sporting connections. Prince Philip could personify the new wildfowler, presented as a modern figure of energy and action and in the mid-fifties associated with the rhetoric of a ‘new Elizabethan age’ combining a mixture of national modernization and respect for existing hierarchy. New wildfowling would update but not overturn the order of things.

Shooting tenancies on the reserve were nevertheless terminated in March 1963, following a NNT Council decision in May 1961, responding to concerns over the Trust’s public image. In 1960 Mr A. Jones of Liverpool wrote to Richardson at the Observatory:

I am informed that organised shooting of wildfowl takes place in the winter months. If this be true, I consider it sheer hypocrisy to erect a sign stating ‘Bird Sanctuary’ when nothing could be further from the truth.

Richardson passed the letter to NNT President and wildfowler Colin McLean (McLean 1954), adding:

I have acknowledged and explained that Cley Bird Observatory cannot be held responsible for the policy of the Norfolk Naturalists Trust adding that you as President would welcome the opportunity of putting him in the picture.

Richardson’s irony plays on the presentation of the reserve as a safe space for birds well before the 1966 formal designation of a Bird Sanctuary. Thus Reginald Gaze’s 1950 Souvenir booklet of the North Norfolk bird sanctuaries, covering Scolt Head, Blakeney Point and Cley Marsh, pictured the ‘Watchers’ at each site protecting birds. One photograph showed the hands of Billy Bishop holding three tiny bittern chicks, another presented him in the reed, playfully holding a young bird: ‘Billy Bishop, Cley Marsh Watcher, and Bittern Chick’ (Gaze 1950, 13; also see Bishop and Bishop 1996, plate 11). A reader unaware that sanctuary did not preclude shooting might be surprised that watchers presented in such style could kill alongside care.

When shooting ceased on the reserve the Trust stressed this was not a moral decision. The holders of shooting rights protested that a ban was against local tradition and the character of local nature:

Some bird-watchers feel that Cley marsh could be exploited (like Slimbridge) as a place where rare birds would be virtually on exhibition to the public, but this ... would not accord with the true aims of the Trust which must be to protect such places of natural interest in Norfolk from development.

Leading figures in the NNT sympathized; in 1963 Timothy Colman wrote to H. Birkbeck of Castle Acre clarifying policy, and highlighting the easily accessible East Bank as the problem spot:

In fact the Trust has not taken any omnibus decision that no shooting is to take place on any Trust property. There have unfortunately been difficulties, however, at Cley where the public has had such easy access along the east bank to the Trust’s property and at Hickling where Coot shoots have attracted publicity in the press. These have led ... to letters of complaint from members and after several years of discussion the Trust eventually decided to stop shooting at Cley and to stop, after this year, the Coot shoot at Hickling. There are, however, other properties where shooting still takes place and I personally hope that this will always be so.

The NNT indeed excluded part of the reserve from the Bird Sanctuary. In August 1966 the BDWA were given permission to shoot over that part of the reserve between the western bank – beside which ran the public Beach Road – and the River Glaven. NNT Secretary Montgomery wrote to BDWA Chairman Mr E. Clarke:

Every effort must be made by members of the Association to avoid dead or wounded birds falling within the area of Cley Bird Sanctuary, since shooting over that area is strictly forbidden by the Wild Birds (Cley Sanctuary) Order issued by the Home Office. If it should happen by genuine accident, the shooter must leave his gun outside the protected area and may only take a dog under firm control to retrieve the bird. He should report the incident to the Trust Warden, Mr. W. F. Bishop, at the earliest opportunity. If substantiated complaints are received of shooters or their dogs causing disturbance within the Sanctuary, permission to shoot over Trust property will be withdrawn.

The BDWA agreed to the terms. In December 1966 the Trust erected a notice board at the end of the west bank:

PRIVATE PROPERTY

NO SHOOTING WITHOUT AUTHORITY FROM THE BLAKENEY AND DISTRICT WILDFOWLERS ASSOCIATION.

Tensions between shooting and sanctuary are negotiated through zoning, whereby bird protection attracting visiting humans as well as birds takes place alongside regulated wildfowling. Spatial management aims to sidestep moral controversy. Birds must not however fall across the border. Death beyond the western bank should not be evident to
the birdwatcher in the sanctuary. A complex spatial balance of rights and regulations is key to the coexistence of nature conservation and new wildfowling, though the balance might be tipped by a stray corpse.

Otters and otter hunting

This section of the paper considers arguments over otters and otter hunting through two issues: the ways in which otters could or could not be known through hunting and science, and the consequences of presenting hunting as ritual. Examples are again predominantly drawn from Herefordshire and Norfolk, though here without detailed local case study. The period also saw the otter becoming a literary and filmic star through the continuing popularity of Henry Williamson’s 1927 *Tarka the otter* (Williamson 1963), and new works by Gavin Maxwell (1960) and Philip Wayre (1965–1976). Detailed consideration of such renderings of the otter are beyond this paper, but they helped lend popular sentiment to the animal, and cut across hunting’s claim to be the only way to bring the otter to visibility.

Knowing the otter

Otter hunters seem reluctant even to attempt to become modern. While scientists used hunt observations as data, their conclusions on population decline made hunting harder to support. Media coverage made otters simultaneously wild, mysterious and domestically appealing, a combination further countering arguments for hunting. While wildfowling presented itself as a free pursuit subjecting itself to modern regulation, otter hunting appeared a practice intricately defined by complex and arcane ritual, necessarily set in its ways, and with ways far from modern.

In 1945 there were 17 otter hunts in Britain, each with a regional territory or ‘country’. Otter hunting involved a pack of hounds under a Master, Kennel Huntsman and Whippers-In, with hunt followers on foot. Analogy can be drawn with Marvin’s account of foxhunting as performative legitimate killing, with the country divided into territories of enactment, the huntsmen, field, hounds and quarry performing certain social roles, and ‘an aesthetic and expressive quality and a dramatic structure to hunting that elevates it beyond the utilitarian’ (Marvin 2000a, 108; 2000b). Otter hunting was the subject of local reporting, the *Hereford Times* giving a typical account in 1945:

On Saturday morning the Hawkstone Otter Hounds met at Burford Bridge on the River Teme. . . . Captain R. E. Wallace bringing hounds back to the main river, whence the pack soon found the otter, which made up-stream, and went to earth in a holt on the side of the bank. The terriers did some spade work, soon dislodged it, and it took to the water. After an exciting hunt hounds killed it in mid-stream. The pack then drew onto Little Hereford, where we called it a day.  

Herefordshire rivers were hunted by the Wye Valley Otterhounds and Hawkstone Otterhounds, Norfolk rivers by the Bure Valley Otterhounds and Eastern Counties Otterhounds. Hunting ceased in 1978, never banned but ordered to stop under the 1977 Conservation of Wild Creatures and Wild Plants (Otters) Order due to population decline.

Otter hunting echoed wildfowling in that hunt data informed biological study. Marie Stephens’s 1957 *Otter report*, commissioned in 1951 by the Nature Conservancy’s Otter Committee, and supported by the Universities Federation for Animal Welfare, drew on hunt records (Stephens 1957). Stephens attended three hunts during research, but was sceptical of claims that hunting supported otter populations. By the late 1960s concern grew over declining numbers, and a Mammal Society survey, commissioned by the Council for Nature and the British Field Sports Society (BFSS), again used hunt records. While not blaming hunting for decline the report recommended: ‘For at least the next ten years or so . . . the killing of otters and further pollution should be avoided as much as possible’. In response, the BFSS and Council for Nature stressed hunting’s role within research: ‘To call a stop to all Otter Hunting would remove the one reliable source of information on otter populations’. A national scheme was proposed whereby certain rivers in, for example, Norfolk would be ‘drawn by packs of Otterhounds at the request of Mammal Society in order to obtain information for the next survey’. Other rivers would be ‘hunted, but no kill will be made unless considered necessary (E. G. A sick or maimed otter)’. In Herefordshire decline was less severe and hunting days would simply be reduced.

If there is some alliance of sport, science and conservation here, other elements suggest cultural tension or conflict. Otter hunting is strongly aligned with forms of ‘country knowledge’ appearing resistant to science. Hunters and anglers commonly suggested otters killed for pleasure, leaving salmon and other humanly valuable fish dead on a stone, with a calling card of one or two bites:
The otter is a very much more fierce quarry than the hare . . . and the amount of damage that it does fully warrants the keeping down of its numbers by hunting. A favourite habit of the otter is to catch a fish, take two bites from the shoulders and then catch another one. (Colville 1940, 163)

Stephens’ Otter report stated, however: ‘Not once did I come across a partly-eaten fish on the bank’ (Stephens 1957, 55). In Herefordshire, Captain H. A. Gilbert argued for protection in part via countering this image:

they are interesting creatures and do little harm – if any – to fishermen. . . . I have only twice seen a dead salmon on the rocks with a piece bitten out of the shoulder which is always said to be the trade mark of the otter.19

Richard Fitter used the image sardonically in a radio broadcast in 1955:

And there’s no doubt that in some rivers they do take a lot of salmon and trout, and even commit the heinous sin of biting a bit out of the fish’s back and leaving it on the bank.20

Brian Vesey-Fitzgerald’s ‘New Naturalist’ volume on British game also downplayed the threat:

Is not the menace on a salmon river that it used to be thought. Kills a great many eels, and certainly does more good than harm. Does not merit the serious attention of the game-preserver. There are occasional rogues, but the number is small, and the otter, anyway, is a delightful animal. (1946, 207)

Those presenting the otter as predator on commercial value placed it within a hunting discourse suggesting respect for the animal yet a need to kill to protect human interests. Wildfowl rarely suffered such categorization; in the Nature Conservancy’s survey Janet Kear downplayed the loss of agricultural produce: ‘Compared with the depredations of a species such as the Wood-Pigeon, the losses due to wildfowl are infinitesimal’ (Kear 1963, 315). Otters could by contrast threaten some humans’ interest. In 1953 Alan Savory, later a BDWA committee member and contributor to The New Wildfowler, described ‘War with the Otters’ preying on his ornamental duck:

Some of them were found lying wounded on the banks, with half their bills torn off. Some had a great bite out of their breasts. Some were found dead and mutilated out on the marsh. There was a hole dug under the wire-netting in one place, and there were otter-hairs sticking on the wire. (Savory 1953, 118)

Savory employed trap and gun: ‘He was a beautiful animal, and he stared me out as I shot a .22 into his brain’ (Savory 1961). Savory set out his contract:

Otters are lovely animals, and here in England we are short of wild animals. The vast majority of people in England have never seen an otter in the wild state. . . . This is as it should be; as long as the otter looks after itself as it has done in the centuries that have flown and avoids man and all his works like the plague and keeps behind that secret curtain of the wild, so long will he live and prosper. But when otters go in for robbery and violence and try conclusions with the human race it can only end one way, although the otter asks no quarter and gives none. (Savory 1953, 116)

The presentation of the otter as elusive, living behind a secret curtain, supported epistemological arguments setting sport apart from science, with the animal only encountered through hunting. Scientific observation or nature study did not make the animal visible, visceral and knowable. Hunting could also be supported via the characterization of the otter as intelligent, cunning, playful, and sporting, suggesting it had equivalent footing to the sporting human; for others though such character implied the otter did not deserve the hunt. Marvin discusses similar arguments concerning encounter in the hunting of the fox, where ‘a key element of the enactment is to bring about its presence’, yet the event also ‘produces invisibility’ should the fox take evasive action: ‘The fox is always there as potential or possibility but it must be conjured out of the landscape’ (2000a, 111). Marie Stephens reflected on the difficulties of seeing otters, despite finding tracks and spraints: ‘By far the best way to see otters is to take up fishing and not deliberately to watch for them at all’ (Stephens 1957, 32). For others hunting was the way to draw the otter into visibility. The Hereford Times reported:

N. E. Hill-Trevor, a member of the British Field Sports Society otter committee (said) . . . ‘Because they (non-hunters) don’t actually see otters in the river, they think they are desperately scarce. But I’ve lived beside a river all my life and have actually seen an otter only twice – other than when hunting.’ Captain R. E. Wallace, Master of the Otter Hounds for 30 years, had also seen only two in the same circumstances. His successor, Mr Michael Downes, had seen only one except when hunting.21

Methodological distinction is claimed for hunting’s special techniques, reinforcing an image of a self-contained pursuit involving a deadly pact with the animal.
The sense of hunting as a privileged deadly practice was central also to anti-hunting campaigns, with otter hunting presented as especially brutal, ritualistic and deserving prohibition ahead of fox hunting, shooting etc. The parliamentary Scott Henderson Committee on Cruelty to Wild Animals reported in 1951:

Hunting does undoubtedly involve suffering for the otter, and the degree of it is rather greater than in most other field sports . . . much depends on the need for control, and that can only be decided when more is known about the habits and way of life of the otter. (quoted in Stephens 1957, 7)

Otter hunting could face sabotage. In June 1966 the Eastern Daily Press gave front page coverage to four students laying false trails on the banks of the River Bure. Alongside photographs of the Eastern Counties Otter Hounds moving off and students hunched over aniseed, the report described the scene:

As the dogs moved along the river banks trying to pick up the scent of otters, and the huntsmen – in their Bavarian-looking blue uniforms with red facings and red woolen knee stockings – walked across meadows and chest-high nettles and squelched through black mud and jumped slithery ditches, the students were trying to distract them.

Whether or not they succeeded remained uncertain. During the time they were present, no otters were scented by the hounds, they reported. At one stage the dogs went along the line of a false trail – ‘but whether that was coincidence or not we’re not sure,’ said Nigel Rees later.22

For those against the sport the moral issues were clear. Bertram Lloyd’s 1956 A vile sport: facts about otter hunting, for the National Society for the Abolition of Cruel Sports, outlined an acute landed barbarism:

it is a ruthless, cruel, torturing, bloody pastime. This method of exterminating the otter . . . has not even the merit of being economic. . . . Otters are hunted for one reason only – for the pleasure a hunted otter gives to the hunter. . . . And it is indeed a sorry, stunted mentality which can derive pleasure from the deliberate, planned, organised infliction of pain on a lesser being. (Lloyd 1956, 1)

Lloyd quoted an extract from Country Life (1934) under the heading ‘blood-lust’:

Ah! out comes the otter (after terriers have been sent in under the tree-roots to dislodge him) . . . At last the huntsman stoops and grabs something. He stands up, holding the something high above his head . . . it is the otter. . . . The crowd falls back. They have really screened a gory rite – the skinning and masking of the otter. The huntsman, with bloody hands, throws the carcass of the dead otter up in the air, and the hounds and terriers scramble madly for the grisly prize. The mask is presented to a young gentleman. (Lloyd 1956, 10)

The ‘End of an Otter Hunt’ was pictured, a hunter triumphantly holding the dead otter aloft; an identical photograph had appeared in the 1936 pro-hunt Deer, hare and otter hunting (Wiggin 1936). An updated 1968 NSASC pamphlet Facts about otterhunting added: ‘Mask, rudder, pads are cut off, distributed among members of the hunt, and the carcass thrown to the hounds. . . . Otterhunting can only be described as calculated savagery’ (National Society for the Abolition of Cruel Sports 1968, 2).

In such commentary otter hunting becomes a mystery rite suggesting primitive humanity. Just as hunting could welcome imperial associations, so anti-hunting argument could play on assumed Western superiority, with hunting consigned to a savage past still extant in the non-West but inappropriate in modern England. In the 1968 NSACS book Against hunting, R. F. Rowley, Chairman of the League Against Cruel Sports, described attending an otter hunt:

I had just witnessed a stupid, senseless, bloody murder – ‘you can easily face the rest’, I told myself. I pushed myself forward and found the observance of Mau-Mau-like rites taking place in broad daylight not forty miles from London. (Rowley 1968, 98)

Such associations do not circulate around wildfowling. Arguments around otter hunting present a mystery rite involving a visceral pact with the animal; for one side this is the only way to know the otter, for the other it is barbarism in broad daylight. Similar points were made in letters to the Hereford Times in 1969 debating the practice.

Mrs Blowers of Crowards Mill, Leominster wrote:

I decided to stop them from hunting on my land last year because the year previously they spent all day hunting in a small stretch of water near the house before they eventually caught and killed an otter. It was a disgusting exhibition. . . . I have not seen an otter for more than two years. We had three otter slides on our land at one time, but there are none now.23
between Herefordshire conservationists and hunters concerning possible regulation. Here technical language underlines cultural distance. Rodney Bennett, the first Secretary of the Herefordshire and Radnorshire Nature Trust, set up in 1963, recalls ‘a whole series’ of meetings with the Master of the Hawkstone Otter Hounds at the Green Dragon Hotel in Hereford:

RB: we did entertain the Master of the . . . otter hunt . . . and discuss ways that the activities of the hunt could be made less deleterious . . . to wildlife . . . He was in fact very sympathetic . . . certainly over lunch he was. And I always remember him saying, right, well from now on I’m quite settled, the hunt will not indulge in prilling.

Interviewer: What does that mean?

RB: Exactly! So he got up for a moment and I said to Dr Walker . . . ‘what on earth is prilling?’ He said, ‘I haven’t a clue . . . you’d better ask him.’ So I said, ‘will you please explain what prilling means?’ . . . sometimes apparently if an otter is being pursued it might break away from perhaps the main stream and go up a side stream, and it was the practice of the hunt . . . to pursue the quarry up there, and no doubt with much less water available it would be easier to catch.

The Trust came away feeling that they had ‘secured a very valuable non-prilling agreement’. 24 The story as told today continues to distance Bennett and the Trust from the rituals of a particular section of the landed class, with the sport dominated in Herefordshire by aristocratic and gentry figures. Whatever the ground given on prilling, there would be no ‘new otter hunter’.

Landscaping life and death

If shooting ducks and geese could be restyled around the new wildfowler, a new otter hunter did not emerge. In Animals and modern cultures Franklin discusses hunting and angling as practices produced through modern social relations and technologies which express an anti-modernity: ‘If any sort of activity expresses an opposition to and a rejection of the social character of modernity it is angling and hunting sports’ (Franklin 1999, 106). Neither wildfowlers nor otter hunters could be seen as enthusiasts for all things modern, yet their different stories in this period of modern nature indicate differential abilities to accommodate to modernity and seek modern style, the wildfowler restyled as newly efficient, the otter hunter cast as archaic relic. The two are formed through different animal landscapes, and in this paper we have considered the detailed spatial practices through which these animal–human relations proceed, the place of imagery and different sensual modes of encounter within the figuring of animal and human bodies, the landscaping of human conduct, and the scaling of practices through differential local knowledges, county and other territorial organization, national argument and regulation, and imperial capacities and allusions.

Three further points on the animal–human landscapes through which practices are performed can be made in conclusion, all emerging from the contrast between wildfowling and otter hunting. Firstly, the distinction between bird and mammal makes otter hunting less humane to its critics, and makes for different kinds of landed interest, the otter inhabiting spaces also stocked with animal things of value to landed or riparian humans, the duck or goose flying in and having minimal engagement with a human territory itself often deemed uneconomic. The human edibility of wildfowl and inedibility of the otter may lend social justification to wildfowling when carried out for routine food gathering rather than gentlemanly shooting.

Secondly there is distinction in styles of killing. In his discussion of fox hunting as performance Marvin notes: ‘Ideally death should occur, but it is the manner of realizing that death that is fundamental’ (2000a, 108). The manners of otter hunting and wildfowling are radically different; the former could be labelled as arcanely ill-mannered, while the latter styled itself as good conduct within modern rules. Otter hunting entails proximity to the moment of animal death following a grounded pursuit through splashing water and with hound sounds and human shouts. Wildfowling ideally entails a sense of clean death, a shot from distance picking a bird from the sky with an obedient dog to retrieve. The latter mode of death can be styled by advocates as clean, skilled and precise. Critics can label the former a messy scramble with blood shed in water. Despite wildfowling occurring over marsh and mud, environments celebrated in accounts of fowlers’ hardiness, the kill itself is presented as ideally clinically dry. Otter hunting resists such clinical imagery.

Thirdly, the setting of events is key in discussions of who can kill in what style where. The open marsh and mudflat suggests clear horizontal landscape over which fowlers move and expertly conceal
themselves, with birds flying over in morning or evening, shots fired upward and birds dropping downward. Such an arena could be styled as an efficient sporting space, given new wildfowling’s correct equipment and ethos. Marsh and mudflat give opportunity for sporting reinvention. The pursuit of an otter upriver, or into smaller prilling streams, or between watercourses, indicates a complex, muddled landscape of scents and tracks, advances and backtracking on the part of animal, humans and dogs, prey going to ground and being dug out. Effectiveness in such a landscape, grown over and in leaf during the summer hunting season, does not lend itself to a rhetoric of modern sport on clean lines. The new wildfowler and the old otter hunter, the wildfowl and the otter, live and die through very different animal landscapes.

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Notes

1 Linsell was warden at Fingringhoe Wick nature reserve in Essex, and from 1975 the warden at Hickling Broad Nature Reserve on the Norfolk Broads; see Linsell (1990).
2 Fisher’s The birds of Britain was also published separately in Collins’ Britain in Pictures series. Fisher was one of four general editors of the Collins ‘New Naturalist’ series, and had close Norfolk links, acting as President of the Norfolk and Norwich Naturalists’ Society for 1949–50, and later providing the foreword for Michael Seago’s Birds of Norfolk (1967); Fisher’s comment on Mass Observation draws a parallel with the social research organization founded by fellow ornithologist Tom Harrisson, which aimed in part to transfer natural historical alongside anthropological methods of observation to the human populations of Britain.
3 Nicholson gave a similar account in interview, Chelsea, 9 July 2002.
4 Interview with Richard Fitter, Great Shelford, 1 August 2002.
5 Interview with Moss Taylor, Sheringham, 23 October 2002.
6 Interview with Bernard Bishop, Cley, 23 October 2002. Foreshore shooting was also regulated from 1965 when the Firearms Act required fowlers to hold a licence, normally issued by WAGBI, to shoot on this Crown land.
8 Letter, Aubrey Buxton to E. A. Ellis (Secretary, NNT) 13 May 59 in file ‘Norfolk Wildlife Trust’ EAE Sec. 60s’; Norfolk Wildlife Trust Archive.
12 ‘Confidential. Shooting Agreement – Cley-next-the-Sea’ in file ‘Norfolk Wildlife Trust EAE Sec. 60s’, Norfolk Wildlife Trust archive.

24 Interview with Rodney Bennett, Hereford, 19 October 2001.

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