

# Rain

There's a smudge of silver on the wooden path beside the water. Just a gleam on the wet boards. Laurie stops and crouches down to examine it, like a hunter on a trail.

Fish scales, he says softly, explaining, almost in a whisper, that otters will devour small prey in the water but need to land a big fish to eat it. So any fishy remains suggest an otter's recent presence.

We walk on, following the wide curves of the Tweed along the riverside path, scanning the water and the banks for signs of otters. I notice yet again that Laurie sees more than the rest of us. Even when he's not holding a camera to his eye, he's looking at the world through a wide-angle lens, then homing in on the smallest detail. He takes in the whole span of the river at a glance, yet notices the dew on a spider's web. He points out a tunnel of flattened vegetation where otters have made their way along the riverside, and the nicks in the bank where they slip in and out of the water, and the heron on the opposite bank that takes off, lifting its bulk into the air with improbable grace.

The river is big and swollen, a wide expanse of

rolling, surging, brown water. And we're looking in it for a small brown head about the size of an orange. Laurie says how hard it is to see them, that 'getting your eye in' is everything. Look for something that goes against the grain, he says, something different, like a movement or a sudden splash.

I'm looking. There is movement everywhere and sudden splashes all over the place. The river is taunting me, dancing over rocks that could be an otter's head, flicking up sticks that could be the tapered tip of an otter's tail.

Great big splashes of raindrops start to fall, leaving pockmarks on the water's surface. We take refuge in one of the fisherman's huts along the riverside and stand in silence at the entrance, watching the rain and the river outside.

I'm mesmerised by the body of water rushing past, the way it moves, throwing words around my head in an attempt to find one worthy of describing it. It strikes me that one of the reasons otters are so difficult to spot is that they're so like the river itself. Each word I try fits otters, too: powerful, playful, muscular, twisting, turning, flowing, surging, splashing,

rippling . . . as if otters are river incarnate.

There's a harsh 'krar krar' from the opposite bank. 'Did you hear that jay?' asks Laurie.

The rain is getting heavier. It's nearly 9 a.m. now, late in otter terms – they're likely to have fed and played and looped and curled and headed back to their holts by now. Slowly we make our way back along the wet riverbank, still willing the rolling water to yield up an otter.

It doesn't. Yet I'm feeling strangely elated, despite the rain and the longing for a cup of tea. I'm remembering that lovely Alice Walker title, *Horses Make A Landscape Look More Beautiful*. It's true. I work from an attic office and from my desk I can see a few distant fields over the rooftops. A tiny silhouette of a horse in the corner of a field lifts the whole view. And otters . . . they make the landscape more exhilarating. I can see the paths myself now, otter-width, flattened grass by the water's edge, closer to the river than our path. The riverbank feels alive, tingling with the promise of their presence.