

the River Otter Journal

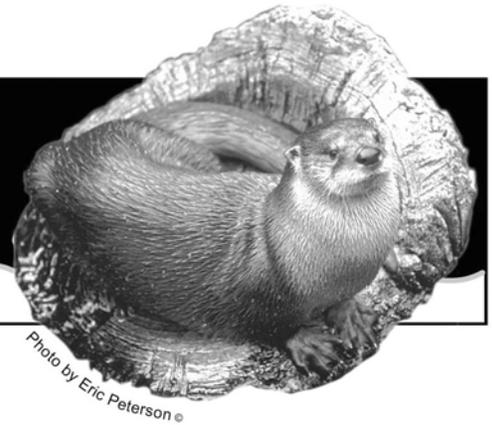


Photo by Eric Peterson ©

Volume XVI, Number II, Fall 2007

Table of Contents

Rare River Otter	
Sightings in the Wild	1, 4
President's Message.....	2, 3
Otter Updates.....	3
River Otters	
Make Comeback –	
in North Dakota	5
Otters Enjoy Retirement:	
Part II.....	6, 7
Sea Otter	
Survey Results.....	7, 8
Proximity	9, 10
Traveling with Otters:	
Tampa's Lowry	
Park Zoo	10, 11



Photo © Eric Peterson

Rare River Otter Sightings in the Wild

By Carol Peterson

River otters in the wilds of Colorado, Utah, Wyoming, Montana and Alaska have proved to be elusive, even with great effort to observe them in their natural habitat in the hours of their activity at dawn and at dusk. Finding evidence of their recent visits, such as slides, tracks and scat next to the stream, are encouraging signs in knowing that they have frequented the area; however, biologists, photographers and enthusiasts, such as my husband and I, have rarely had the privilege to view them in action. This summer on two separate occasions, we were fortunate enough to be in the right place, with photographer Eric Peterson, at the right time to witness river otters in the wild. The photos included here record the extraordinary, unique abilities of the river otters we encountered.

Our first encounter took place in Yellowstone National Park in early June, when the cutthroat trout were spawning, drawing many animals and birds to the inlet streams to test their fishing skills. We have seen bears, eagles, osprey and even an enterprising coyote take trout from the stream. After years of patiently waiting, we were rewarded with a full morning viewing of two very active river otters. Their early morning routine included catching fish with ease and expertise, eating with relish and resting on their grassy log. After dining, they swam across the lake from their den to use their latrine and, by sprainting, they left their scent for others. Then they headed to the inlet to check whether or not the trout had started spawning during the night. While we watched the otters, a lone coyote came to evaluate the spawning area. The actual spawning had not yet started, much to the coyote's disappointment; however, the cutthroat provided easy prey for an osprey that we watched attack the fish from the shore.

Otters in the Wild continued on Page 4

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The River Otter Alliance is a non-profit, tax-exempt group. All work and efforts for this organization and *Journal* are on a volunteer basis by those who share a common concern for the welfare of the river otter and its habitat. We invite all interested persons to contribute their time at any level of the organization.

THE RIVER OTTER JOURNAL

is a semi-annual publication of the River Otter Alliance. Look for the next edition of **THE RIVER OTTER JOURNAL** in Spring 2008!

River Otter Alliance Mission

The River Otter Alliance promotes the survival of the North American River Otter (*Lontra canadensis*) through education, research and habitat protection. We support current research and reintroduction programs, monitor abundance and distribution in the United States, and educate the general public through our newsletter, *THE RIVER OTTER JOURNAL*, on the need to restore and sustain River Otter populations.

Our goal is to be a center of communications among wildlife biologists, environmental organizations, fishermen, and all interested parties on a national and international basis, in order to ensure the healthy future of the North American River Otter.

 *The River Otter Journal* has been printed on 30% post-consumer recycled paper.

President's Message

Preserving Headwaters for the Benefit of Wetlands

Those of you who have been reading this column for the last decade recall that autumn is Judy's favorite season. Those of you who know Judy also know that summer is her least favorite, so entering the new season marks a sharp – and positive – transition for her. I am ambivalent between spring and autumn; I enjoy them both for the obvious presence that each brings. Of course every season is a challenge for wildlife, including our beloved otters. By autumn, new pups have adjusted to their environs, learned to swim and fish, while the adults are preparing for the coming winter. Humans, on the other hand, may be preparing a different kind of challenge for them.

Rarely does an urban community get to enjoy the frolics of otters. Eugene, OR – a community of about 150,000 – is an exception. Eugene is at the southern extreme of the Willamette Valley (the Willamette being one of the few rivers in the U.S. that flow from south to north), where the three forks and other tributaries of the Willamette River collect just in time to flow right through downtown. A lesser-known river in the valley is the Long Tom, which originates in the Coastal Range west of Eugene and joins the Willamette about twenty miles north. On the Long Tom at the western edge of Eugene is Fern Ridge Reservoir, used for flood control and summer irrigation in the southern Willamette Valley (not to also say summer recreation). Fern Ridge forms the anchor of the West Eugene Wetlands, a protected area of about 25 square miles owned and/or managed in different parts by a coalition of The Nature Conservancy, Bureau of Land Management, the City of Eugene, and Lane County. The Wetlands is host to an abundant variety of species, including its raison d'être – the endangered Fender's Blue Butterfly and its host, the endangered Kincaid's Lupine, both indigenous to the southern Willamette Valley. Spring is rich with breeding species, including ducks, geese, terns, swallows, blackbirds, herons, egrets, osprey, the occasional bald eagle, and other wetland species. Did I forget to also say otters (and beavers and mink and [invasive] nutria)? Two years ago, the spillway was opened and the reservoir not allowed to fill with winter rains and spring runoff so the aging dam, which was determined to be at high risk, could be rebuilt – done in record time, I might add – to capture the winter rains once again.

Flowing into Fern Ridge from the southeast is Amazon Creek, a waterway about a dozen miles long that originates on a ridge that forms the southern boundary of suburban Eugene. Amazon Creek meanders its way through the heart of the city (collecting all the runoff in the southern half of Eugene along its course), then through the Wetlands, and finally into the reservoir. Strange that at the same time the Fern Ridge dam was being rebuilt, otters began appearing in Amazon Creek. It's hard not to build an argument for a causal relationship here, although no scientific study was performed. Fish and their prey had to go somewhere while the dam was under construction; why not here? Initially they appeared within the first few miles of its terminus, but gradually farther and farther upstream until finally, one day, an otter was photographed at its headwaters. Today, otters are seen regularly up and down Amazon Creek, including in the concrete channel that forms that portion of the creek that flows through town. (Strange, too, because Amazon Creek registers high in arsenic, no doubt a runoff pollutant). In fact, multiple sightings of six otters are being regularly reported on the Creek in the Wetlands just as this is being written. Judy suggests these may be a group of males or a female with two generations of pups.

Just as otters and their prey will find new territories when their old ones are even temporarily rendered uninhabitable, so is the causal relationship between the quality of headwaters and the quality of downstream wetlands. Protecting the headwaters in their natural state lays the challenge for those of us who care.

President's Message continued on Page 3

The headwaters of Amazon Creek are on a rugged, forested hillside, privately owned, within Eugene's urban growth boundary and zoned for residential development, but adjacent to and indistinguishable from large areas of designated open space. Three development proposals for the headwaters have been turned back in the last three years, largely due to grass roots opposition, including Judy's testimonial reports of otters on the Creek and in the Wetlands, my testimony on the Doctrine of Nature's Trust (the subject of next issue's message), and the detrimental impact development would have on water quality for the food chain. Expert testimony from geologists, who discovered a tongue of land slippage directly in line of the proposed development, and water quality specialists, who determined that post-development arsenic levels in the Creek would exceed health standards, helped sink any hopes of development. So far the grass roots neighbors have prevailed. Too bad that the city blew a chance to acquire the largest of the three parcels three years ago for half the current asking price.

As of this writing the headwaters properties are the subject of proposed acquisition by the City of Eugene by an act of eminent domain. Hopefully, by the time you read this, that acquisition will be a fait accompli, leaving the otters to enjoy their serendipitously discovered new homeland and the Wetlands, free from the pollution and other effects of development.

Meanwhile, sit back and enjoy this issue of the *Journal*. Glenn Chambers continues his saga of river otters in retirement; Carol Peterson reports on her excursions into Yellowstone and Denali National Parks; the Spring 2007 sea otter survey results show a positive increase in numbers; and a research project in North Dakota (led by Tom Serfass) is evaluating river otter distribution along the Red River of the North. Finally, Steve Foss shares his experiences photographing otters in Minnesota with a suspenseful narrative that, at the same time, exposes a sensual, anthropomorphic intimacy of sharing a river otter's domain that we all feel but fear to express. Even the most parochial scientist among us cannot be unmoved by the human sensuality aroused by this story.

Otter Updates

By Diane Tomecek

David



For otter aficionados who may have missed parts (or all) of *Planet Earth*, on *The Discovery Channel*, the *Fresh Water* episode (Show #9 originally aired April 15, 2007), shows a brief feature of Smooth-coated otters that is well worth viewing. Through teamwork, a group of five to eight otters chase off a thirteen-foot crocodile! To learn more about possible future airings of the program visit: <http://dsc.discovery.com/convergence/planet-earth/about/episode.html>.



California has stepped up to inform and educate the public about sea otters and their importance to the marine ecosystems in which they reside. Various California mayors from cities including Monterey, Santa Barbara, Santa Cruz and San Francisco declared September 23 – 29 to be Sea Otter Awareness Week. For information about events that took place during this historical week visit the Defenders of Wildlife website http://www.defenders.org/programs_and_policy/wildlife_conservation/imperiled_species/sea_otter/education_and_outreach/awareness_week.php.



The Monterey Bay Aquarium offers an updated text on otters called *Wild About Otters*, an expanded edition of the previous text, *Sea Otters*, to include information on the freshwater otter species (Asian Small-clawed and African Spotted-necked) featured in the exhibit. For more information e-mail giftstore@mbayaq.org or call 877-665-2665. Additionally, for the readers young at heart, the aquarium offers many interesting and educational otter on-line interactives. A favorite of mine and of grade school teachers is the *What's an Otter?* interactive found at: http://www.mbayaq.org/media/all_about_otters/whatsanotter01.html.



October 2007 is becoming a lively month for otter (and other mustelid) informational and research conferences. The 25th Mustelid Colloquium is being held in Czech Republic (see Spring 2007 edition of *The River Otter Journal* for more details) and the 10th International Otter Colloquium is being held in Hwacheon, Korea from October 10 – 16. For information go to: <http://www.otter2007.org/new/eng/>. The Korean conference is interesting because, according to Jim Conroy of the IUCN Otter Specialist Group, the otter has been termed an "ambassador of peace" and it is "currently one of the only species which, by traveling along the river, can cross the border between the two countries" [North and South Korea].

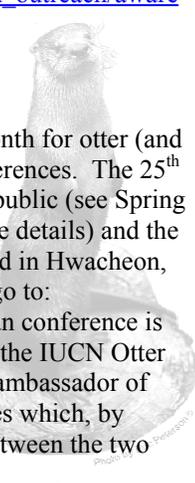




Photo ©Eric Peterson

Otters in the Wild continued from Page 1

His talons took hold of the huge fish and with wings widespread on the water he struggled to take off with the weight. Finally, he was airborne and circled several times over the otters, who were returning to their den, slipping through the water with amazing speed. The osprey landed in a tree resting his prize on a limb over the otter den, and ate his hard earned meal. One of the river otters, which we guessed to be the smaller female, disappeared into the den while the second otter took a snooze on his favorite log. Every once in a while his head peeked through the grass, curious when he heard a noise, then he settled down again like a dog, curled up on a comfortable resting place. Every ten to fifteen minutes he got up to investigate the waters near the log. At one point, the otter dove to catch a fish and either held it in his forepaws to eat it in the water or dragged it up on the log for easier access. After several hours and many photographs, our pair vanished

from sight as if they magically disappeared without a trace. As the day warmed up, most of the activity on the lake ceased except for a few ducks cruising across the smooth surface.

The first week in July, during a visit to Denali National Park in Alaska, we had our second opportunity to watch a river otter in the wild. Near the park entrance, we hiked to Horseshoe Lake late in the evening. Upon asking departing visitors if they saw any wildlife, their answer was unanimous, "There are no animals or birds at the lake." After reaching the lake however, we discovered several beavers busily adding to their extensive lodge, dragging branches through the water and using mud to plaster the outside. From past experience we knew this was a good sign because river otters will frequent or use beaver dens. It wasn't long before a river otter popped out of the lake to investigate the beavers work. He checked out the lodge before crossing the lake, coming directly at us as if to say, "I know you are watching

me in your binoculars." He came up on the rocks next to me, stood on his hind legs for a better view of his observers, huffed his warning, turned and slowly swam up the lake and out of view. My son took an excellent video of both the beaver and the river otter. The action film clearly reveals the contrast between how a beaver swims - low and flat with its nose breaking the water in a wide 'V' pattern - and how a river otter swims - gliding faster with its neck and head held high, like a periscope. The rest of the river otter body is only visible as he dives and the sleek tail comes into view. The video will make an excellent training tool for confirming future sightings of river otters in the wild.

The curious, adept river otter remains elusive to most would-be observers, but we are thankful for even the brief time we were honored to watch and record two sightings during June and July 2007.

River Otters Make Comeback [in North Dakota]

By Richard Hinton

Re-printed from *The Bismarck Tribune*, April 28, 2007

River otters are recolonizing in eastern North Dakota, but don't expect to see the torpedo-shaped, brown mammals in the Missouri River anytime soon. The Red River of the North and its tributaries are the focus of an ongoing research project to evaluate the distribution of river otters and other mid-sized carnivores. The man overseeing the project is Tom Serfass, a professor of wildlife ecology at Frostburg State University in Frostburg, MD. He was in Bismarck on Thursday [April 26, 2007] to meet with state and federal wildlife researchers.

Graduate students have been doing field-work on the project for more than a year, traveling "up and down the Red and tributaries of the Red in boats, canoes and walking to detect droppings," said Serfass, who holds a Ph.D. in wildlife and fisheries science from Pennsylvania State University. The project will last two years, and not only will determine where otters are coming from, but how they are doing.

He [Serfass] already had put in time along the Red River with the students despite the high water. "Walking around the last week with four inches of mud on your boots makes you feel tall," he joked.

River otters are identified as a species of conservation priority by the North Dakota Game and Fish Department. The project will help researchers in the future keep up with the state's otter population, said Patrick Isakson, a NDGFD nongame biologist. "We will know where [the otters are] when we go out in three, five or ten years," he said. "It's important to do what we have in our power [to do] to keep them here."

Federal funding helps researchers keep up with otters and other critters that don't get the same attention as game animals, such as white-tailed deer. "It's what State Wildlife Grants were developed for," said Isakson.

River otters once were found on all major water systems in the state and on most major waters across the country, Serfass said. "They disappeared across a large portion of the United States in the late 1800s before there were wildlife agencies, seasons and bag limits. They were vulnerable to overharvest," said Serfass.

While many states have implemented projects to bring river otters back, the dark brown mammals are doing it on their own

in North Dakota. "They are unique here. They are coming in naturally," said Serfass. "We think they are expanding from Minnesota."

Researchers will expand to the Turtle Mountains this year in hopes of tracking distribution of otters and also fishers and martens, said Serfass. Five otters have been documented on the Forest River, northwest of Grand Forks. A student new to the project spotted the otters. "We were skeptical until we saw the tracks," said Serfass. Otters also have been seen and photographed in the Grand Forks area.



Photo © Walt Clifford

There also is an otter population on the eastern part of the Yellowstone River in Montana. "They have been sighted at Lake Sakakawea, but not confirmed," said Dorothy Fecske, NDGFD furbearer biologist. Otters are considered furbearers with a closed season. Two otters were trapped accidentally last season in North Dakota, and both were turned over to NDGFD, said Fecske, who will do necropsies to determine gender and diet, among other things.

It's conceivable river otters, which are about the size and shape of a dachshund, eventually could expand to the Missouri River, Serfass said. "In North Dakota, there's a limited amount of aquatic habitat, which is what made them vulnerable," he said. If otters do re-establish themselves on the Missouri, they won't compete with anglers for walleyes. "I don't think walleyes are a major part of their diet," he said. "I think [it's more] the common carp. It's slow and abundant."

Otters Enjoy Retirement Too:

Part II

By Glenn Chambers

Editor's Note: At the conclusion of Part I, Glenn was describing his educational otter program, *On the Road with Paddlefoot Productions, Inc.*

We knew when we began this program that someday it would come to an end. We didn't spend much time worrying about when that time would come, we just knew that we would recognize it when it became apparent. The first indicator was when Slide, after six years on the road, began to suffer from motion sickness while traveling. We immediately afforded him the luxury of "early retirement" and an opportunity to stay at home. We felt compelled to consider his well being, first and foremost. He didn't like the idea of being left behind because he was quite attached to his buddy, Splash. But he made the adjustment and Splash carried the otter banner alone for the remainder of the tour.

The day finally came when Splash decided that he had had enough of this "going it alone." Following so many trips and presentations, he had discovered that he didn't have to get out of the car after arriving at a presentation site. The carrying cage inside the Suburban was constructed in such a way that he could elude us and there was no way to reach him to bring him out. No amount of coaxing would work. But guess what? When we arrived at home, safe in the driveway, he was *anxious* to jump right into my arms and was happy to be carried to the otter play-yard to join his buddy, Slide. It was always a happy reunion, a lot of grunting and preening, followed by some heavy frolicking and splashing in the swim tanks.

Following thirteen long years, Jeannie and I were tired, the otters were tired, and we had worn out six Suburbans. We knew the time was right to terminate our contract with the Missouri Department of Conservation [MDC]. We made the decision to have our final presentation at the Runge Center, where we had begun our presentations with Paddlefoot some thirteen years before. I knew that I would not handle the occasion well. I am the emotional type and I am teary-eyed even as I write this account.

We made the formal announcement and advertised our final MDC presentation. We had presented at the Runge Nature Center about forty times during our otter career, and had garnered quite a following. On that final night, Splash carried the program alone. By 6:30 p.m., the auditorium was already at capacity, well ahead of the 7:00 p.m. starting time.

Splash was a great little ambassador that evening – he knew the routine well. After all, the appearance was his three hundred thirteenth event. He had learned to calculate the length of my oral presentations and he could tell by my body language when the end of the show was nearing. He came over to my side, reared on his hind legs and gently bit on my fingers as if to say, "Come on Dad, it's time to go." As usual when addressing large audiences, I wore a lavalier microphone attached to my shirt. I bent down to his level, on my hands and knees, and

asked him if he wanted to "say goodbye to the kids," He responded, as he always does, with the "otter grunt" several times. Through the microphone it was always audible to the audience. We finished the question/answer session that evening after we had answered every question the audience offered. We were honored with a standing ovation as we closed the final chapter in the "over the road" otter presentations book.



Photo © Jim Low (MDC)

Splash and Slide are completely retired now. It is a pleasure to watch them as they enjoy their retirement, right here at home where they grew up. They are very laid back, very trusting of me. In the past, when we were doing weekly programs, they were always suspicious when I appeared because they knew that it was probably the beginning of another long trip to a presentation someplace. They were phenomenal at reading my body language and they always knew when the jig was up.

The average time required of them, from the time we left home until we returned, was about seven hours. The longest trips that I ever planned were nine-hour sojourns; and I kept those to an absolute minimum. An average time budget was two hours en route to an event, an hour set-up time, an hour presentation time, an hour tear-down time and a two hour return trip.

Do they miss it? *No.* Do I miss it? *Yes.* I always enjoyed the kids and I loved to see the smiles and sparkling eyes when they came face to face with the otters. I also enjoyed the interaction with the adults in the audience. We had lots of folks who attended several of our presentations. We made a lot of friends along the way and I guarantee you – we created a whole bunch of new "otter enthusiasts."

Otters: Part II continued on Page 7



Photo © Glenn Chambers

Long range plans? Splash and Slide earned their retirement and they deserve the very best that Jeannie and I can provide for them. They enjoy a large play-yard equipped with a Jungle Gym with water slide, two fifteen hundred gallon capacity swim tanks filled with fresh water and lots of play toys of numerous descriptions for enrichment. A goldfish pond provides the opportunity for them to chase, catch, and eat golden shiners that I provide for them on a regular basis. An eighteen-foot long canoe filled with water provides them a chance for some long swims. They exercise often and have never exhibited the symptoms of “bored otters.” They have three nest boxes and two large hollow logs for sleeping quarters; they prefer the natural hollow logs.

I feed them twice daily. Their diet consists of ground sirloin (90% fat free) as the base, shredded carrots for roughage, cod liver oil for the fish oil component of the diet, tomato juice for vitamins, eggs for coat luster and mink meal for dietary supplement. Each otter consumes almost a pound of this mixture at each feeding. I feed it raw, right off the ends of my fingers. It is about the consistency of meat loaf. The otter food bill at our house averages just over \$400 per month. *Yes, they do eat better than we do!!*

The “Boys” receive considerable pampering, especially during really cold weather and during extremely hot weather. They have their own sleeping room in our basement, equipped with large poop pan, watering devices, play toys, blankets and “silkies” (Jeannie’s old silk-type night gowns; they love to drag them into their sleeping area).

They really enjoy coming into the house. At first we have a rowdy game of “otter tag” in the recreation room. They usually get pretty hot during those heavy running and exercising excursions and enjoy going back outside to jump into the swim tanks to cool down. A couple of sessions of that nature and they are ready to bed down for a long nap. A ten-hour long “sleep” is not unusual.

We plan to let them live out the remainder of their lives here with us. We had five boys at our house and let me tell you two otters equal five boys any day! Longevity records of captive North American River Otters reveal that these animals can easily survive to reach eighteen or nineteen years of age. Splash and Slide are eight years old now – *YOU DO THE MATH!!*

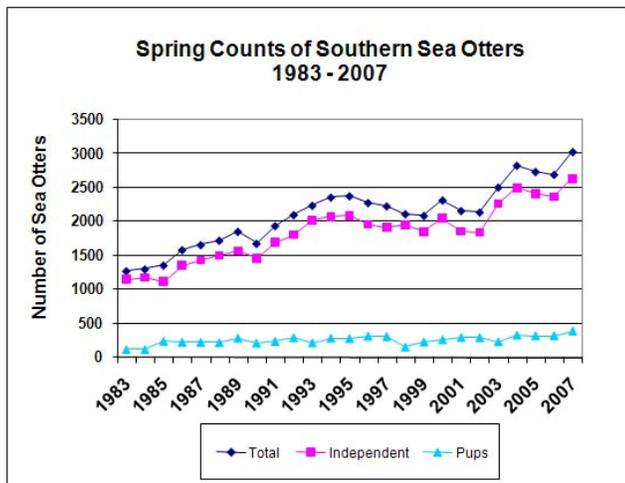
Spring 2007 Mainland California Sea Otter Survey Results

*published by the U.S.G.S. – Western Ecology Research Center
Piedras Blancas Office Santa Cruz Field Station
contact Brian B. Hatfield, brian_hatfield@usgs.gov*

YEAR	INDEP	% CHANGE	PUPS	% CHANGE	PUP/INDEP RATIO	TOTAL	% CHANGE
1995	2095	0.9	282	-0.4	13.5 : 100	2377	0.8
1996	1963	-6.3	315	11.7	16.0 : 100	2278	-4.2
1997	1919	-2.2	310	-1.6	16.2 : 100	2229	-2.2
1998	1955	1.9	159	-48.7	8.1 : 100	2114	-5.2
1999	1858	-5.0	232	45.9	12.5 : 100	2090	-1.1
2000	2053	10.5	264	13.8	12.9 : 100	2317	10.9
2001	1863	-9.3	298	12.9	16.0 : 100	2161	-6.7
2002	1846	-0.9	293	-1.7	15.9 : 100	2139	-1.0
2003	2270	23.0	235	-19.8	10.4 : 100	2505	17.1
2004	2495	9.9	330	40.4	13.2 : 100	2825	12.8
2005	2417	-3.1	318	-3.6	13.2 : 100	2735	-3.2
2006	2369	-2.0	323	1.6	13.6 : 100	2692	-1.6
2007	2637	11.3	389	20.4	14.8 : 100	3026	12.4

Table 1. Summary of Spring Surveys, 1995 – 2007.

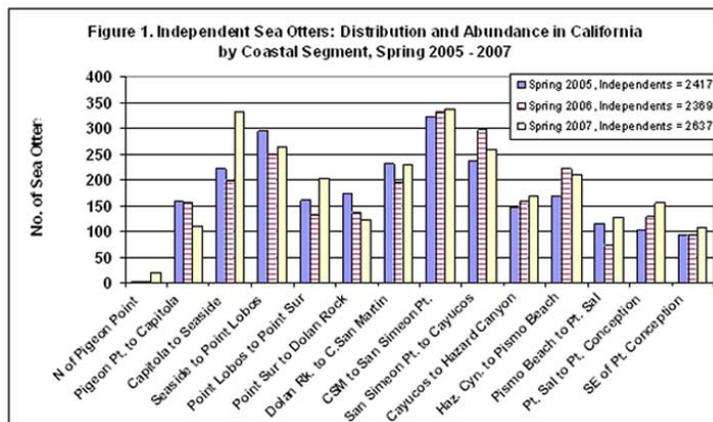
Sea Otter Survey Results continued on Page 8



The spring 2007 sea otter count began on May 2 and was completed on May 17. Overall viewing conditions for this survey, 2.7, were more favorable than those during the spring 2006 survey (2.4, where 0 = poor, 1 = fair, 2 = good, 3 = very good, and 4 = excellent). Macrocyttis surface canopies were noted to be relatively low or thin in many areas. The survey boundaries were Point San Pedro in the north to Rincon Point in the south.

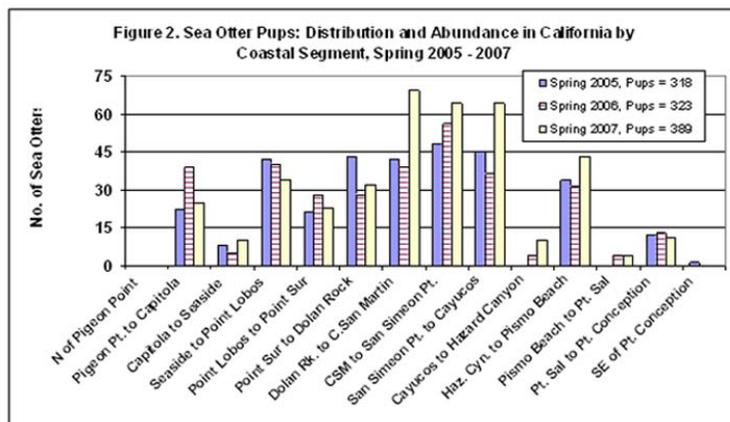
The total sea otter count, 3026, is 12.4% higher than the spring 2006 count and 7.1% higher than the previous high count of 2825 in spring 2004. The number of independent sea otters observed, 2637, is 11.3% above the number counted last spring (Table 1 [page 7]). The count of the north half of the range (defined here as north of Cape San Martin) is up approximately 18%, while the south half was up about 8% from the count last spring. The central part of the range (Seaside to Cayucos) was also up 8%. The coastal segment with the largest increase in sea otters this spring was from Capitola to Seaside, with an increase of 135 independent otters. This area was counted under excellent conditions this year compared to good conditions last spring. Two other areas had increases in the number of independents of at least 50 animals: Point Lobos to Point Sur (69) and Pismo Beach to Point Sal (56). The two areas with the largest decreases in independent sea otters were Pigeon Point to Capitola (-47) and San Simeon Point to Cayucos (-37). One hundred six independent sea otters (and zero confirmed pups) were spotted east of Point Conception this spring, which is similar to the number counted during the last 2 spring counts (92 in 2005 and 93 in 2006, Figure 1).

This survey [was] a cooperative effort between USGS-BRD-Western Ecological Research Center, CDFG-Marine Wildlife Veterinary Care and Research Center, Monterey Bay Aquarium and many experienced and dedicated volunteers, including docents of the Point Lobos State Reserve and members of the Pacific Cetacean Group. Assistance was also received from staff of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the California Coastal Commission, and U.S. Minerals Management Service. A special note of appreciation is extended to Sue Benech, Jud Vandevere and Phil and Carole Adams.



What is different this spring is that 39 of these were spotted east of Gaviota, with 29 in the Naples Reef area, approximately 7 km west of Coal Oil Point (and 50 km east of Point Conception). None were spotted east of Gaviota during the spring 2005 count and only one in spring 2006. The southern-most sighting was of a single animal near Santa Barbara Point; the northern-most being an individual approximately 3 km north of Pillar Point. Note: we get occasional reliable reports of sea otters – almost always single animals – beyond the boundaries of our survey. We believe the number of these animals is insignificant, but will expand our survey search boundaries when more than one or two animals are seen in an area for extended periods.

The pup count this spring, 389, is 59 more than the previous record of 330 pups counted in spring 2004. Increases in the central part of the range accounted for most of this increase. Compared with the pup count from last spring there were 30 more in the coastal segment from Dolan Rock to Cape San Martin and 28 more from San Simeon Point to Cayucos. There were 14 fewer pups observed north of Capitola this spring (Figure 2).



The count this spring, because it is higher than the 2004 spring count, has a positive effect on the 3-year running average for independent, pups and total sea otters. The 3-year running average for total sea otters is up 2.4% to 2818 animals (Figure 3). This is the metric the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Southern Sea Otter Recovery Plan recommends using to reduce the influence of anomalously high or low counts from any particular year.

Proximity

By Steve Foss

Editor's Note: Steve Foss, a nature photographer and writer, illustrates how his encounter with a river otter helped him make a life changing decision.

After changing out of slush-crusting clothing and warming myself in front of the fire, I realized how much the experience owed to surprise. The truly unexpected shocks away ennui and cleanses the palettes of mind and heart. It readies us to receive.

My mind was on other things as I crossed the frozen bog creek near the Boundary Water Canoe Area Wilderness several miles from Ely, Minnesota. So distracted that when I crossed the creek going out I noted a fresh otter trail and a hole in the ice tucked into last summer's leatherleaf shrubs on the creek edge, but shrugged and went on, preoccupied with the business matters I'd taken the hike to get away from.

Curious behavior.

I am a nature photographer and writer. I moved to Ely nearly five years ago to do those things in one of the last places that offers a wilderness feel in the lower 48 states.

For all that time, I have been searching for experience, for interaction, for understanding.

The sentient otter, who appears genial and tolerant of human presence, has been part of that. One of my goals has been to spend time with this animal. To photograph and write about it. To get the feel of it.

I took the walk that March day to ponder whether I should abandon the safety net of a fourteen year newspaper and editing career that once was an adrenaline push but had become rote. To look ahead into a new venture is seductive, but to take the plunge is frightening.

Three hours after crossing the creek I returned. I'd found no inspiration in the boreal forest, though I had knelt and placed my hands in the tracks of wolves, had rubbed cast-off deer hair from their kill between my thumb and index finger, had enjoyed the company of gray jays and ravens.

I did not at first believe what I saw on the creek was an otter. A faint movement of brown on brown suddenly became the animal's head backing from the hole into the water.



Photo © www.stevfossimages.com

I was 50 yards away.

Not likely I'd be able to approach, but my thought has always been that you've got to use what woodcraft talent you have and do your best. If you do, good things can happen.

I circled downwind, which also in this case put the sun angling somewhat behind me, and slowly, so slowly, stepped my way forward.

All or nothing, I vowed. I kept moving until I was seven feet away from the otter's hole, just a foot farther away than the minimum focus distance of my telephoto lens, and hunkered down to wait.

It was about 10 [a.m.] on that day, and a brisk fifteen mph wind funneled down the creek bed, typical boreal forest winter weather.

I was dressed for it in insulated knee-high rubber boots and all-season waterproof bibs and parka. I hunkered at the edge of the creek, crouched down on my haunches, snow up around my thighs, the frozen creek off one side and the thick low shrubs of the bog off the other.

A good place to wait for otters.

After a few minutes, bubbles rose to the top of the hole, and the water bulged slightly.

Just as the otter pushed its nose through into the air, my legs went through the ice. I grunted in surprise, and the otter went back down the hole.

My legs were now fully extended, and my booted feet rested on the bottom of the creek bed. The creek was shallow with a hard bottom, or I may have become inextricably mired and would not be here to write about this now.

As it was, two feet of water encased my legs, then ice, then slush, then snow. The snow topped out just below my chest, and there I stood wondering whether the otter was swimming around my shins exploring the situation.

To try to heave myself out and reposition or to stay?

I was fully insulated by wool and other materials that hold warmth even when wet. That being said, I could not stay this way indefinitely.

I decided to wait a bit and see.

The water bulged again in the hole and the otter poked his head out.

My camera came up as if of its own accord and I began shooting.

The animal slicked its way out of the hole and moved toward me curiously, too close for my lens to focus.

That was just fine. I put the camera aside and simply watched.

This otter, I thought, is like a young child who is warned not to talk to strangers but whose curiosity is irrepressible. I was reminded of my oldest daughter, who as a three-year-old was full of life, [always] brimming with her latest experience. Her eyes sparkled.

Fifteen years later, standing in water, slush, ice and snow up to my chest, teeth beginning to chatter, I was again brought up short by how things that happened then blend into things that are happening now, and that time can stand still — for just a little while.

Sinuous, the otter extended its head for a moment, backed up, came forward. A syncopation of its own, a statement full of life and seeking.

Proximity continued on Page 10

Proximity continued from Page 9

I did not reach out my hand, although I could almost have touched this creature.

For nearly an hour we were this way.

The otter rolled in the snow. Lay on its back in the sun, closed its eyes. Cleaned its paws. Clowned around like they do, one moment donning a snowcap, the next shrugging it off and giving me a blank stare.



Photo © www.stevfossimages.com

I confess with no shame that I spoke to it. Used that relaxing low timbre like when I was breaking horses in Colorado. The voice that said: All is well, we're happy to be with each other, how's it going there, fella?

I have never been a man who willingly confers human emotion upon animals. They have lives of their own, sensibilities that flow along different tides than ours. We are fooling ourselves if we think we can fully understand these motives. And at that moment,

my heart deeply resonating with this simple companionship, it did not occur to me to ask why, to ruin with the imposition of reason a splendid time.

Too soon, far too soon, bog-stained water a few degrees above freezing crept in with soaking fingers through my bibs and over the tops of my boots.

My body began first shivering, then shuddering to retain heat.

There was still the walk back to my pickup, and it would be a difficult walk.

Eventually, when it became impossible to hold the camera steady, when the vibrato in my voice as I spoke to the otter convinced me it was time to get moving, I said goodbye, set all my camera gear as far away from me as I could, and heaved myself up into the shrubbery on the bank.

The otter did not leave.

I gathered all my gear, put away the camera, slung the camera backpack onto my back and buckled the straps, now with a very real need to get moving and generate warmth.

I forced my legs into action back along the way I had come. As I entered the mix of pine and spruce along the edge of the bog, I paused and turned for a last look. The otter was standing next to the large hole my body had made, leaning over and sniffing it.

The otter looked at me for a moment, then pushed off in that effortless way otters have, entering the water through my hole, not his.

The hike back warmed my body and cleared my thoughts.

And I reflected on courage, which so many believe is the absence of fear in fearful situations. It is not. Courage is doing what you believe should be done even when you are afraid to do it.

It was on the hike back to civilization that I made my decision.

Steve Foss quit his newspaper job in June and now works from home in Ely, Minnesota as a freelance writer, editor and photographer. To see more of his work, visit www.stevfossimages.com.

Traveling With Otters (Tampa's Lowry Park Zoo)

By Diane Tomecek

Special thanks go to Jason Davis, Marketing Coordinator of Tampa's Lowry Park Zoo, for facilitating this interview.

While working on the spring edition of *The River Otter Journal*, my husband found and saved for me a very endearing photograph of a North American River Otter pup pictured in our local newspaper. The photo was taken by an Associated Press photographer in Florida and featured the otter pup crawling through and chewing on various items in the photographer's press bag. The caption revealed the otter was an orphaned female named Olive, who was being transferred to the Lowry Park Zoo after being originally found by children (and, subsequently, a SeaWorld Orlando employee) residing in Orlando. I had found my subject for the Fall edition of *Traveling with Otters!* I contacted the zoo and Virginia Edmonds, the Assistant Curator of Florida Mammals, was kind enough to reply to some questions about Olive and the other otters at the zoo.

Q: Based on an Associated Press photograph pictured in *The Denver Post* of Olive at the end of April, I understand she was an

orphaned three-month old pup then. Can you tell us about how she came to Tampa's Lowry Park Zoo?

A: Olive was found by a SeaWorld employee in Orlando, Florida. She was with some neighborhood children who had found her. He took her away from them and brought her to SeaWorld. They called us to see if we could take her.

Q: What was the initial care and treatment provided to Olive?

A: Olive was offered Pedialyte® in a bottle for the first twenty-four hours. She moved to Esbilac® with a 3:1 ratio after that. She was fed every three hours with the first feeding at 0500 [5 a.m.] and the last feeding at 0100 [1 a.m].

Q: How is Olive doing? Has she transitioned well to her new surroundings?

A: Olive is doing great. We received two additional otter pups after her. They were raised together. They are all with our adults (a male and female) at this time.

Traveling continued on Page 11



Photo © Tampa's Lowry Park Zoo

Q: Olive would now be about seven months old, do you anticipate that she will remain at Lowry Park Zoo? Would she be transferred to another zoo or aquarium? Could she potentially be re-released?

A: Olive will remain at the zoo for the time being. Transfer to another zoo or aquarium is a future possibility. Release into the wild is not an option for her. She became too imprinted from her contact with humans.

Q: Are there any other species of otter at Lowry Park Zoo?

A: No, just the North American River Otters.

Q: According to your website, the river otters are part of the Florida Boardwalk habitat area. What can a visitor expect to experience while visiting the otters there?

A: The Florida Boardwalk consists of native wildlife from Florida that includes the bald eagle, white tail deer, red wolf, bison, black bear, Florida panther, sandhill cranes, wild turkey and striped skunks. We are also a manatee rehabilitation facility. The otter exhibit features both land and underwater viewing of the otters

playing in their exhibit. The theming is reminiscent of a riverbank with a stream, [a] pool, logs and foliage.

Q: Do you have special feeding times at the zoo?

A: We do have set feeding times with the otters, but these are not part of the zoo's keeper talks or any educational programs.

Q: Do you have any river otter educational programs? If so, can you describe them?

A: The otter exhibit does not have a "keeper talk" educational program. However, Tampa's Lowry Park Zoo School, a fully accredited on-site school featuring preschool, kindergarten and camps, does study the otters as a part of Florida wildlife, mammals and the letter "O!"

Q: What are some of the issues facing wild river otters in Florida?

A: The biggest obstacle for the river otters in Florida is pollution. With agricultural run-off, sewage, and litter, the wetland area [in which] the otters thrive is becoming more and more polluted. Development throughout Florida has also decreased the amount of natural environments for the otters.

Q: What does Lowry Park Zoo do to assist with the environmental issues facing river otters in Florida?

A: We try to educate zoo guests via educational graphics and signs about the otters and their challenges in the wild. Our docents (volunteers) also like to spend time near the exhibit telling guests about these charismatic animals.

One of the biggest ways that we have helped the otters is by volunteering to take care of injured or orphaned otters. We take great pride in our conservation efforts at the zoo.

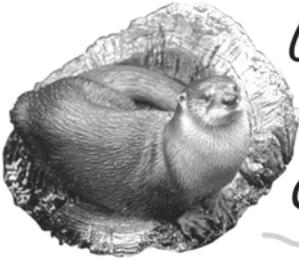
From the Kid's Corner Sea Otter

By Maddie O'Hare, Grades K-6, Annapolis, MD



Photo © Bev Weaver

Slipping and sliding
Ripping and riding
Living in nature's pool of life
Dipping and diving
Laughing and thriving
Sleeping in floating beds of green
Ducking and fighting
Scratching and biting
Living without a care
Hiding and pecking
Finding and seeking
Playing in life's hearty game
Hunting and feeding
Resting and eating
On clams I do dine
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Happy ever more



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