



North American River Otters (*Lontra canadensis*) on Whidbey Island

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Why Care About River Otters on the Island?

- In addition to contributing to the ecology and the biodiversity, river otters are an *indicator species*. Their health is an indicator of the ecological vigor of the wetlands and the organisms within their habitat. River otters are especially vulnerable to pollutants as contaminants have an additive effect on their tissues (esp. liver).
- Salmonid populations in the Salish Sea are in trouble, river otters pose no competitive threat to orcas, seals, sea lions, or the commercial fishery. River otter's opportunistic diet is largely non-game fish. Their fast metabolism requires high volume with low energetic output; thus, they prefer low-energy species (e.g., sculpin, flatfish, sticklebacks, etc.) rather than forage fish, salmon, or trout. Scat sampling of Admirals Cove river otters revealed no salmonid or rockfish species from either the brackish or marine latrines sampled.
- Wildlife viewing pleasure – when spotted, they are a joy to watch. River otters are near-sighted and sensitive to movement, try to remain still and at a distance (e.g., imagine two cars between you and the otters for a minimum distance) so you don't scare them off.

What Are the Major Threats to River Otters?

- Loss of habitat (support WCLT!)
- Pollution/Stress (suppresses immune system function)
- Zoonotic disease (e.g., canine distemper)
- Trapping & poisoning (humans)
- Pup predation (e.g., coyotes and eagles)

Otter Observation Suggestions

Based on the initial results of this study the following are the conditions to see otters at Admirals Cove.

- In the fall, Admiralty bay at low-tide from dawn/early morning or in early evening (e.g., 6:00 – 9:00) – watch the tidegate
- During the winter/spring, you have a better chance of seeing otters in Admirals Lake, at dawn or very late at night (midnight or later).
- Fission/Fusion (social separation/socializing or mating) timing: April and May are excellent times for seeing temporary romps of unrelated otters (mating season).
- Pay attention to the birds, are heron or eagles nearby? They frequently capitalize on otter leavings.

Want More Information?

- Provided copyright and intellectual property protections, I freely share publications, presentation pdfs, collaborate, support, and advocate for those seeking wildlife and habitat conservation.

When They're Not So Cute

- Otters camping out in your boathouse or under your deck? Consider checking out, Russell Links' "Living with Wildlife" (2004), for tips to humanely and non-invasively deter otters and for odor mitigation. Also consider motion-activated LED spot lights directed at their preferred holt.

Island River Otter Research Benefits from Citizen Scientist Reporting

How you can help

- Contact Heide Island if you see a river otter (or otters) either through email or phone (see contact info)
- The more specific the information, the more helpful it is, ALWAYS PHOTOGRAPH if you can!
- Here is a rubric to help guide your observations

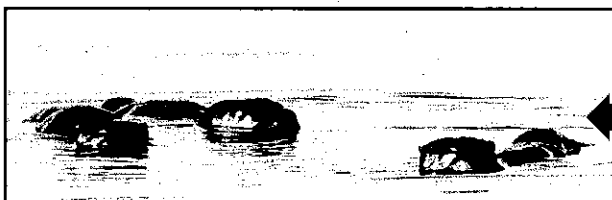
Your Name:	
Your Contact Info:	
Date:	
Time of Day:	
Location:	
Weather:	
If near the ocean what as the tide?	
Other wildlife or people around?	
Did you observe otter sign?	One or more otters?
	Carcass?
	Scat? A latrine will have two or more scat piles
	Den/Holt?
	Tracks?
If you observed otters, can you describe their muzzle markings?	See image below to help provide guidance
What were the otters doing?	Feeding? Can you identify what they were eating?
	Marking? Rubbing, rolling, or scratching at the earth – remember they have scent glands on their hind feet
	“Latrine dance” looks like a jig followed by defecation. If you observed this, look for the angle of urination (toward the head or the tail?)

Not sure if it is river otter tracks or scat? Photograph it and refer later to Nature Tracking website when you get home: <http://www.naturetracking.com>



Note the Muzzle

- Does it have unique markings?
- Handsome has dark fur beneath both nostrils and a narrow goatee
- **Challenge:** Coloration may change as the otter matures



River Otters in the Ocean/River/Lake

- Very low profile in the water
- Look for flat, square heads an inch above the water
- Sometimes they assume a “Nessy” (Loch Ness) posture
- Look for frequent dives