

## Wild Families of the Watershed

by Aviva Rossi

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The 28 square miles of the Corte Madera Creek Watershed support a large variety of aquatic and terrestrial animals, in addition to the renowned—but much reduced—salmonid populations of our creek. The following are brief snapshots into the lives of two of our wild neighbors, whose families have been here for many generations, along with, and before ours.

There are the playful and elusive northern river otters, feeding on the fish of the creek. Occasionally, a visitor to the surrounding terrestrial habitats of the creek is granted a

special glance of a resident bobcat. The presence of these species offers a sense of the influence of the wild areas, primarily along the ridges of the valley, which contribute to the healthy watershed so vital to a healthy creek.

Walking slowly upstream in waders, conducting a survey for spawning salmon in a nearby watershed, suddenly we felt a quick underwater bump and brush along our waders. We turned just in time to see the tell-tale sleek brown body of the river otter dive back under the water. There was a local family of otters nearby, and they were just thrilled to have the easily obtained feast that the salmon that have completed spawning provide, and right at the start of the winter months.

Otters are very playful animals, a trait rare in adult wild animals. This species wrestles even as adults, and have been known to make slides down slick river banks and treat themselves to this homemade amusement park. Sliding is also used as an efficient means of travel across grassy slopes or ice. Other forms of play include chasing their tails, playing with captured prey. An otter in San Anselmo Creek was seen rolling energetically in moss before returning to the water and playing with a plastic plant pot.

Their young, called “kits”, are born between February and April. They start playing by the time they are about five weeks old. Although they wean at about 12 weeks, they stay with their mother, and she provides them solid food for almost a year. They are a very social species, and the basic social group is the mother and her young of that year. These basic family groups sometimes include “helpers” consisting of unrelated adults, yearlings, or juveniles. This extended social time provides precious opportunities to see the mother and her youngsters playing along the creek, possibly enjoying the salmonids and crayfish!

I will never forget the excitement of seeing the



*Over the past two years sightings of river otters have been reported from Greenbrae to San Anselmo. This adult was seen playing and catching a fish near Drake High School. Photo by Charles Kennard*



*Bobcats have characteristically dark-tipped ears, as well as a very short tails that are white on the underside. Aviva Rossi photographed this bobcat on Bald Hill*

mother bobcat emerge onto the fire road from the brush, followed closely by a single kitten. Bobcats can have as many as six young in a litter, although two kitten litters are most common: this time it appeared to be just one. This species is most active when we are sleeping, but they are frequently seen around dawn and dusk, and sometimes on winter days.

Bobcats are about twice the size of a house cat, with males weighing 25-80% more than females! You know you've spotted a bobcat if it looks similar to a large, light brown cat, with a short tail. The name "bobcat" is short for "bob-tailed cat." In October one was seen at the creek near Madrone Avenue in San Anselmo. Locally, sightings of bobcats are often reported as mountain lion sightings, but the latter species is larger and has a much longer tail.

The next generation of bobcat is born in a "natal den" chosen by the mother to be dry, well-hidden, and generally inaccessible to keep the kittens safe. In the wild, these are often natural rocky areas, or even caves. In areas with human structures, storage sheds and other unfrequented shelters may be used. The mother bobcat will often have some alternative locations, called auxiliary dens, where she can move her young to after they are born.



*The gently undulating line of Mount Tamalpais' three peaks looms over Cascade Creek watershed, near Fairfax. Photo by Charles Kennard*

Adult bobcats maintain an exclusive home range, where they hunt for food and raise their young. The size of home ranges varies; in California they have been measured from almost two to more than 20 square miles, with an average of just more than ten square miles. This means that there must be lots of habitat for a healthy population of bobcats to thrive.

Young bobcats start accompanying their mother when she leaves the den when they are about three months old. That must have been about the age of the young bobcat that I was lucky enough to see, trotting on the heels of its mother along the fire road. After the young are six months old, they leave the den to explore on their own, but always staying close. By the time the next litter is born, they will strike out on their own.

As stewards of the land and this watershed, humans are also the protectors of wild animal families who depend on it. It is a great experience to witness these neighbors in the wild, and it is our honor and responsibility to protect that opportunity for our children's children.

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