

River Otters in the Spotlight

by Nick Salcedo
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The river otter, once widespread in the Corte Madera Creek watershed, is an important and very appealing member of the local creek ecosystem, preying mainly on fish, but also on invertebrates and aquatic birds. The Friends reported on the return of the otters in Corte Madera Creek in 2000, when they were seen for the first time in many years, and again in 2013. They are seen ever more frequently in the watershed, from Phoenix Lake above Ross to High Canal in Corte Madera.

In the spring of 2015 the first-ever study of populations of river otters in the San Francisco Bay Area was published in the scientific journal *Northwestern Naturalist* (96(1):1-12), by the Society for Northwestern Vertebrate Biology. The study and report were completed by Paola Bouley, Megan Isadore and Terence Carroll of the River Otter Ecology Project, based in San Geronimo Valley. Historically extirpated from the region, the otter has evidently made a recovery in recent years. Keep an eye out for them in your travels.

The study demonstrated that the river otters are reproducing and expanding into their historic range, documenting the first sightings in years in Alameda, San Francisco and Santa Clara counties. Otters tend to cluster along shorelines, since they hunt and travel, procreate and raise their

young largely in and around water. Along the approximately 200 km Marin County coastline, the intensive study area of the project, the conservative estimate is about 0.25 otters per kilometer of coastline. In 2013, the researchers could identify almost 90 individuals, using "citizen science," where trained "Otter Spotters" reported their observations on a website designed for that purpose. Each report was then reviewed for validity. The researchers used remote field cameras as an invaluable tool for this type of assessment. The study also reports on mortality, mating, maternal groupings and pup-juvenile emergence.

The reservoirs in the Mt. Tamalpais watershed, and a location in the Corte Madera Creek watershed near the Ferry Terminal, are sites recently added to the study area. The Larkspur site will also be providing data for the ongoing study of population genetics and disease sampling.

Otter Spotters have reported sightings as far up the watershed as Marin Road in Fairfax and lower Sleepy Hollow Creek (upstream of Fire Station No. 20). There have also been sightings in the creeks of downtown San Anselmo, Ross, Larkspur and Corte Madera. Phoenix Lake, however, has the most sightings and is a wonderful place to see otters. Remote cameras and careful observation are needed for an assessment of population density, and since there is only one remote camera site in our watershed, it isn't yet possible to estimate population densities.

The river otter's return is a positive sign of the health of the Corte Madera Creek watershed ecosystem. Continued study of otter populations in Marin will help us better understand how otters use our watersheds, how best to make sure our watersheds stay healthy ecosystems.

Learn more by reading the full report, "Return of North American River Otters, *Lontra canadensis*, to Coastal Habitats of the San Francisco Bay Area," www.riverotterecology.org/uploads/3/0/9/0/30906713/roep_nwn_2015.pdf



Near the safety of a stand of cattails, an otter pup watches its mother hunting in Bon Tempe Reservoir. Photo by Don Moseman

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