

The Otters Return

2013

River otters, once close to extinction in the North Bay, but now rebounding, were the subject of a May 30 program hosted by Friends. Megan Isadore from the River Otter Ecology Project described their work researching the return of this elusive aquatic creature now found in all of Marin County's watersheds.

Attendees learned that the once abundant otters were almost extirpated in the USA by 1900 due to trapping for their silky fur, habitat loss and waterway pollution. Their outlook improved in 1962 when trapping became illegal in California, and enactment of the Clean Water Act a few years later led to healthier watersheds. The first Marin County otter sighting was 1989 in Walker Creek, and sightings in Fairfax in 2000 caused great excitement locally.

The year-old otter project has now documented more than 400 sightings using 22 cameras along 100 miles of coastline. A cadre of volunteers checks cameras and collects scat. The scat analysis helps determine what the otters' diet includes, which is largely fish.

Except for Sutro Sam, the otter who moved into Sutro Baths in San Francisco in late 2012, there have been no sightings south of Marin and the East Bay.

River otters are at home in both fresh water and marine environments, and are also agile on land. They need water that is reasonably clean, but not necessarily pristine, and they may be found in eel grass beds, in ditches and stock ponds as well as in our creeks.

In 2011 two otters killed by vehicles near Corte Madera's High Canal prompted Friends to put up otter warning signs in the area.

After the presentation, Megan demonstrated her affection for small furry animals by displaying a basket full of tiny kittens, apparently up for adoption!



*A family of otters was seen by many creek watchers in Fairfax and San Anselmo in 2007, when the animals patrolled the creeks for crayfish and trout. Ultimately, they moved on down to the estuary.
Photo by Charles Kennard*

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