

It's an eel! It's a whale! No – it's a river otter!

by Charles Kennard

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Reactions of puzzlement and wonder met the first known sightings of a three-to-four-foot-long river otter in the Corte Madera Creek watershed last month. Valerie Hood of Fairfax moved to a house overlooking San Anselmo Creek ten years ago and planted native creek dogwoods below her deck, delighting in the stately great blue herons, green herons and kingfishers that flew in to her stretch of the creek behind Dominga Avenue.

A trained environmentalist and devotee of Bob Stewart's nature walks, Valerie dreamed of seeing an otter in her creek, an appearance that would be a sign that "the earth will heal itself if we just let it," she says. Rolling out of bed early one morning last month she glanced out at the whispering creek, to see her dream come true. The sleek dark brown animal was drifting on its stomach with the current, hind legs and tail stretched out behind. Startled by a movement of the equally startled observer, the otter did a flip and headed off downstream.

"It was like seeing a great blue whale," says the awed Valerie, who soon found that upstream neighbor Eileen Frost and her daughter Harlie had seen the otter one afternoon in the same week. This time the curious animal swam in circles watching mother and daughter, then followed the current while throwing glances backward at the waving humans. Rushing inside, Eileen took down her copy of *Ring of Bright Water* by the Scottish naturalist and keeper of pet otters, Gavin Maxwell, to confirm her identification of a species of otter. Just two days earlier, Eileen had seen a pair of steelhead over two feet long, handsome meals for an otter. Around the same time, a class of Drake High School students bolted from their classroom responding to the news of a sighting on their part of the creek near Saunders Avenue in San Anselmo.

River otters are about two-thirds the size of the much rarer but more publicized sea otter of the Pacific coast. Both have been victims of the fur trade – and the river otter still is. Its natural range covers much of Canada and the U.S., but it is no longer found in the Midwest and Plains states. In California, its historic range apparently reached its southern limit in the Bay Area, but according to California Department of Fish and Game biologist Allen Buckman, "Twenty years ago there were very few in this part of the country." However, since the retirement of the last generation of trappers, "they're now everywhere," moving back into parts of their original range in the Bay Area.

Over the past three years several otter families have been seen occasionally in the Lagunitas Creek watershed, and frequently at Soulajule Reservoir, north of Point Reyes Station. It is possibly a single traveling group. River otters readily travel on land (unlike the sea otter), visiting fish ponds and other creeks, so it is not unlikely that our visitor came over from Bon Tempe Reservoir. Steelhead spawning time – February and March – is good hunting time for otters in the Ross Valley, but they also eat smaller fish, crayfish, frogs and small mammals such as mice.

Undisturbed, they hunt in the daytime, submerging for up to eight minutes, and snapping at fish with their jaws. Webbed feet and a strong tail enable them to reach speeds of seven miles-an-hour underwater. River otters are intelligent, and even as adults are inquisitive and playful, making chutes on creek banks or snow up to 25 feet long, onto which they hurl themselves time and again.

Let us hope that the otter leaves enough spawning steelhead in our creeks to give it reason to return another year to chase future generations of fish!

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