



Wild at Heart

Issue One: Summer 2013

“To those devoid of imagination a blank place on the map is a useless waste; to others, the most valuable part.” Aldo Leopold

Stealthy, elusive (mostly nocturnal) and difficult to observe in the streams, lagoons and marshes of the Bay Area, our local otters are superbly challenging to study but the ROEP team has taken on the task whole-heartedly.

When we launched our initiative in 2012, agency maps documenting the North American river otter’s range across the Bay Area and into parts of the Sacramento Valley were blank. **Strongly suspecting the maps were outdated, we and our growing network of 400+ citizen scientists set out into the field across the greater Bay Area to discover what was actually going on.** The further we widened our search, the more otters we discovered - finding not

southernmost documented river otter along the Central CA coast at this time, and the first river otter seen in San Francisco in decades.

We’ve made leaps and bounds over the past year thanks to a stellar team of core partners which includes the Point Reyes National Seashore, Golden Gate National Recreation Area, Muir Woods National Monument, California Academy of Sciences, the Marine Mammal Center, CA State Parks, our Otter Spotters, and of course our highly motivated Board of Directors and Field Team.



Each map point represents an otter or otters seen by our citizen scientists across the Bay Area, a total of 490 sightings and counting!



By Todd Berman, theartdontstop.com

just single otters here and there - but family groups and moms with pups, roving bands of males, and even pioneering young males like Sutro Sam, the

Together, we have undoubtedly filled a blank on the range map and put one of North America’s most charismatic aquatic carnivores back on the Bay Area ecological map. After decades of being absent from our watersheds, river otter populations are clearly undergoing an impressive recovery along the Central California coast. Starting our project at this time means we are able to document the historic resurgence and recovery of this sentinel species as it happens.

Our focal study area spanning 100 miles of coast requires an excellent field team. And our dedicated cadre of volunteer field biologists (see p. 3) monitor stream and coastline areas all the way from San Francisco to the northern-most tip of Tomales Bay and upstream into the highest reaches of Marin’s watersheds on Mt. Tamalpais. Via field surveys and an array of field-cameras – our OtterCams - carefully tucked away in remote areas otters frequent, we document pups and family groups,

mating and other fascinating social interactions, as well as a cadre of local wildlife – from bobcat, coyote, badger, weasel, raccoon and fox, to deer, elk, rabbits, birds and others. Check out a super-fun selection of videos [here!](#)

Our many hours of OtterCam footage of Bay Area’s otters in the wild reveal behavior seldom seen by humans during the day. Samples we’ve collected non-invasively for genetic and disease analyses with California Academy of Sciences and Marine Mammal Center respectively will ultimately allow us to understand the extent, structure and dynamics of the population. **The otter data we collect will not only inform and update agency maps across protected lands of the Bay Area, but also allow us to update oil-spill response and recovery maps and procedures for river otters, which to-date has likely been inadequate, given that species maps were essentially blank for otters.**

While science is an important part of any conservation initiative, building awareness and nurturing co-existence between people and carnivores is essential. Under the leadership of Megan Isadore - our Director of Outreach & Education - the story of river otters and their recovery toured the greater Bay Area, being featured in presentations and video slideshows at 22 venues and environmental fairs [see p. 3]. Audiences have been thrilled with the photos, videos and stories of local otter

and energized by the important messages of hope in restoration, habitat conservation and co-existence with wildlife. The otters could not have a better voice on their behalf than that of Megan's, a tireless and passionate advocate for their conservation. Be sure to join a local presentation - stay tuned [here](#).

Onward we forge, and the year ahead is filled with promise! We are still working hard to raise the essential funds to sustain our initiative.

We've made tremendous progress, but to make the upcoming important leaps we need your help. Please join us - [adopt an OtterCam](#), [sign up for a VIP outing with our field biologists](#), [DONATE to help us make the difference](#).

On behalf of our whole team, THANK YOU to everyone for your continued support!

Paola Bouley, Executive Director



Photo: J. van der Kruijssen, sfwildlife.com



Special Thanks

- Dr. Sarah Allen
- Sharon Barnett
- Dr. Benjamin Becker
- Todd Berman
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- Dr. Gary Fellers
- Darren Fong
- Dr. Frances Gulland
- Dr. John Kelly
- Dr. Bill Merkle
- Brett Miller
- Dudley Miller
- Mia Monroe
- Dr. Brian Simison
- Richard Vacha

As people who study and revere connections, we salute the generosity that supports our work, and most of all the commitment of our supporters to our goals of ensuring a viable future for river otters and all living beings in the Bay Area.

Partners

- Golden Gate National Recreation Area
- Point Reyes National Seashore
- Muir Woods National Monument
- California Academy of Sciences
- The Marine Mammal Center
- California State Parks
- Grants**
- Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy
- Point Reyes National Seashore Association
- The Rose Foundation

- RCM Charitable Fund
- River Otter Alliance/Otternet.com
- Spring Creek Foundation

Membership

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- Deborah Baldwin
- AS Destafano
- Holly Groves
- LM Rubinoff
- Maggie Rufo



Serenoa Steiner, Intern



Cindy Jordan, Membership Database



On the Move Around the Bay

Photo : Point Reyes National Seashore

Getting the Word Out

River otters are known for their elusiveness and ability to operate “under the radar.” Beginning with our Otter Spotter program, the River Otter Ecology Project has brought their quiet return to our waterways to light. In doing so, we have gained the opportunity to advocate for healthy watersheds to help ensure otters, humans and all the living creatures that make up our beloved Bay Area thrive.

Since our launch 16 months ago, reports from citizen scientists (kayakers, birders, hikers, neighbors and scientists; *you*) have streamed in! Arriving at all those sightings didn’t happen without a great deal of outreach, and we took every opportunity to leverage that outreach into education about the importance of healthy watersheds.

We reached out to watershed groups, wildlife rehabilitation groups, schools, zoos, county, state and national parks, birding groups, naturalist programs, water districts, universities and even retirement homes with our popular video presentations on the return of the playful and charming otters. We took our exciting news and information to festivals and events all over the Bay Area, including the Martinez Beaver Festival, the Oakland Zoo’s Earth Day celebration, International Migratory Bird Day in Muir Woods, Sonoma’s Cornerstone Optics and Nature Festival, and the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy Members’ Day. Check out our website under Presentations & Festivals for a full list!

Hilary Maag,
Zookeeper



Susan Prince,
Outreach



Collin Bode,
Biologist



Liz Williams, Biologist
and Educator

Outreach and Education Volunteers

Otters on the Go!

Spring brings baby season, and mother otters must go back and forth between their natal dens and fishing areas to keep their hungry young fed. When our Otter Spotters and volunteers noted an otter crossing back and forth across Muir Woods Road, often dodging traffic, we got to work! Again with the cooperation of our GGNRA and Mt. Tam State Park partners, two signs went up on Muir Woods Road reminding folks to slow down for the otter crossing.



We also featured radio, television, print and social media to get our message out, with the result that we have become the “go-to” people for San Francisco Bay Area otter information.

We’ve been thrilled by the excitement over the otters, and the delight of people experiencing wild, free otters for the first time, often in their own neighborhoods. It’s been a joy spreading the news that human changes can

and do make a big difference to the presence of wildlife close to and even in large cities like Oakland, San Francisco, Berkeley and Richmond. [Please join us by clicking here!](#)

Along with the recovery of otters in our densely-populated Bay Area come some challenges. When Sutro Sam, the first river otter in at least 50 years to be recorded in San Francisco showed up, crowds of people and dogs weren’t far behind. Sam inspired many bloggers, photographers and even San Francisco artist Todd Berman. Our partners at the GGNRA placed barriers and educational signage at Land’s End to allow Sam a safe space to live and fish. Sam remained there, content until he had fished out the large carp from the pool, then returned to being a more typical wild otter - elusive and hard to spot! We’re not sure where Sutro Sam is now, but we know he can look after himself quite well!



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New Education Program

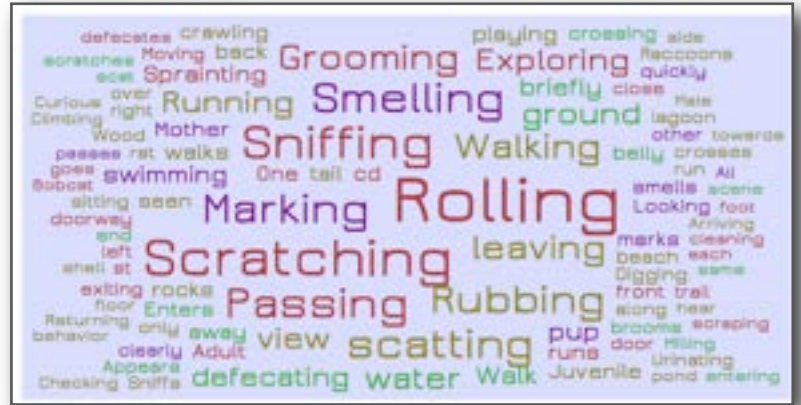
This summer we launched our children’s education program, incorporating watershed education with the arts. **We love kids, we love art and we love ecology....what could be a better combination?** We’re partnering with Nature Bridge, Wild Oakland, the Oakland Zoo and The Watershed Project to bring art and environmental education projects to children. Stay tuned for upcoming events!

Who's on our field crew, and what do we seek?

Part of the reason for spying on otter activities with our remote video cameras is to tease out otter behavior. To that end, we carefully pore through each one-minute video and note the behaviors we see in each. The word cloud at right is a textual representation of the most common otter behaviors seen through our lenses.

Below, our stellar field crew. Each one has a busy life apart from otter work, and their devotion to this project is much-appreciated!

Each point on the map represents one of our focal study areas.



Melinda Barnes, Ecologist

Terence Carroll, Data Whiz

Jeff McCullough, Naturalist

Megan Isadore, Naturalist and Co-founder

Scott Davidson, Tracker

Paola Bouley, Ecologist and Co-founder

Brenden Collett-Grether, Intern

Ginny Fifield, Biologist

Dave Mackenzie, Naturalist

Andrea Dougall, Zookeeper

Peter Barto, Naturalist

Sutro Sam, Wildlife Ambassador

Robert Aston, Biologist

Jonkou van der Kruijssen, Photographer