



OTTERS IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

Two species of otters are found in British Columbia (B.C.) waters. While both are found in marine waters, Sea Otters carry out all aspects of life in the marine environment, and River Otters are semi-aquatic.

Sea Otters were heavily hunted by the fur trade and considered extirpated from Canada by the early 1900s. A small population was successfully reintroduced off the west coast of Vancouver Island between 1969 and 1972; after which they slowly repopulated along the coast. However, Sea Otters are still considered at risk as they face threats of oil spills, illegal kills, entanglement in fishing gear, environmental contaminants, vessel strikes, human disturbance, and direct harvest. The Sea Otter was listed as a species of Special Concern under the Species at Risk Act (SARA) in 2009.

Reporting Sea Otters in Distress

Rescuing an injured or entangled Sea Otter can be dangerous - do not attempt to touch or move an animal yourself. Observe from a distance and report any incidents of injured, entangled, distressed, or dead marine mammals and sea turtles. If accidental contact occurs between a marine mammal and your vessel or gear, regulations require you to immediately report it. Proper species identification (see back) is critical for documenting incidents, and tracking and addressing threats to these animals.

Report any incidents involving marine mammals or sea turtles that you observed or were involved in immediately to Fisheries and Oceans Canada's 24/7 Observe, Record, Report Line

1.800.465.4336 or VHF Channel 16

What to Record

YOUR NAME, VESSEL NAME, AND CONTACT INFORMATION

DATE, TIME, AND LOCATION

General location with latitude/longitude coordinates if possible

ANIMAL TYPE & SPECIES

Describe size, colour, etc.

ANIMAL ALIVE OR DEAD?

IS IT INJURED AND HOW?

ANIMAL'S BEHAVIOUR

ANIMAL'S DIRECTION OF TRAVEL

VIOLATOR'S IDENTITY & DESCRIPTION

Describe violator's identity, boat or vehicle, licence/registration number, any evidence at the scene

Take Photographs/Video

INJURED ANIMAL AND ANY GEAR

All in one frame including injuries

FEATURES TO IDENTIFY SPECIES

FEATURES TO IDENTIFY INDIVIDUAL ANIMAL

Include ear, leg, and flipper tags, branding numbers, pigmentation and colour patterns on skin or fur, any electronic instruments if present

ABUSE AND HARASSMENT

Identify any violators and their actions, video where possible

CORRECT DATE AND TIME

Make sure camera settings are correct

Otter Comparison

Sea Otters are commonly confused with River Otters. Both species belong to the Mustelidae (weasel) family; however, each is distinctly different in its appearance and ecology. Look for these key differences.



River Otters in Distress

River Otter habitats often overlap with human activity resulting in human-wildlife conflict. River Otters are protected by provincial legislation, but incidents of injured, sick, orphaned, or oiled River Otters occur every year. Although they may seem playful, never approach a River Otter, they have been known to attack humans and pets, and females with young can be unpredictable.

If you see a River Otter that you think is in urgent need of care, call **Critter Care Wildlife Society** at **604.530.2064** and they will instruct you on how best to proceed.



Fisheries and Oceans
Canada

Pêches et Océans
Canada



OTTER IDENTIFICATION



Sea Otter

Enhydra lutris

SIZE Up to 1.5 m (5 ft) long / weigh up to 50 kg (110 lb)

APPEARANCE Streamlined but stocky body, and a long, slightly flattened tail. Dense, thick fur varies in shades of brown becoming progressively lighter on the head, throat, and chest with age. Large, blunt head, blunt nose, dark eyes, and small ears. Front limbs different from hind limbs; small front paws; large flipper-like hind limbs for swimming, not walking on land.

DISTRIBUTION Exposed coastal areas typically within 1–2 km of shore; often associated with kelp beds for rafting and foraging. Clayoquot Sound to Cape Scott on the west coast of Vancouver Island; along the north coast of Vancouver Island to Hope Island and other island groups in Queen Charlotte Strait; and islands of the central B.C. coast from Calvert Island to Aristizabal Island.

BEHAVIOUR Lives at sea; rarely come ashore; clumsy on land. Often swims/floats on back at the water surface; groups or “rafts” of 3 to well over 100 individuals. Eat prey (e.g. crabs, bivalves, sea urchins) while floating on their backs at sea. Females give birth to single pup at sea. The pup is carried on mother’s belly.



Sea Otters have little body fat to keep them warm in the cold ocean environment – relying instead on their dense, thick fur for insulation from the cold, and a high metabolic rate to fuel their body temperature. To stay warm and healthy, Sea Otters need to eat a lot to fuel body heat, and groom a lot to maintain insulation in their fur from the cold.

Coming too close to Sea Otters or making too much noise can disturb, stress, or even harm them. All Sea Otters are protected from disturbance under the Marine Mammal Regulations of the *Fisheries Act*. Keep a minimum distance of 100 m away and remember that Sea Otters spook easily and may require greater distances. This is especially true for rafts of females with pups.



Northern River Otter

Lontra canadensis

SIZE Up to 1.4 m (4.6 ft) long / weigh 5-10 kg (11-22 lb)

APPEARANCE Long, streamlined body, and a thick, powerful tail. Thick, shiny, waterproof fur is dark brown in colouration, to almost black when wet with a lighter gray-brown underside. Pointed face, broad nose, small eyes, and small ears. All four limbs are the same; short legs for walking on land with webbed feet for swimming.

DISTRIBUTION Can thrive in any place with a permanent water source and abundant food, including intertidal and nearshore marine environments along the B.C. coast. Prefer irregular shorelines with good vegetation cover and suitable structures for denning.

BEHAVIOUR Semi-aquatic; dens on land; forages along the shore and in the water; climbs out on docks and floats. Females give birth to several kits (2-5) in a litter on land. Swims on its belly; typically brings prey (fish, shellfish, birds, and small mammals) ashore to eat.



River Otters live in and along water courses, spending time on land and in the water where they den, feed, play, and groom. To stay warm, River Otters have a thick fat layer and well-oiled, dense fur that they groom regularly to keep waterproof.