

RIVER OTTERS

A LOVE-HATE RELATIONSHIP

BY JANE MUNDY

PHOTOS TY KENT

While still incredibly cute, these opportunistic

rogues cause havoc on BC's waterways

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Two winters ago, I was walking the dogs at Central Saanich's Island View Beach (a designated off-leash area). Luke, a goofy labradoodle, was frolicking in the water, seemingly playing with a river otter. I saw another otter appear and they were circling, enticing him further from the shore. Figuring they were taking Luke down, I yelled at him to come back, to no avail. The commotion had attracted a small crowd and I asked a woman taking a video of the critters to please hold my phone and shoes. I swam out to Luke in the freezing grey sea, grabbed him by his collar and the otters backed away.

IF I KNEW more about river otters, I might have been a bit more wary about jumping into their midst. While sea otters live exclusively in salt water, river otters, which are found across Canada, can make a living in either fresh or salt water and on land. And their behaviour is unpredictable.

A swimmer at Green Lake in the South Cariboo was bitten nine times. South of the border, actress Crystal Finn, who appeared on the popular show *Succession*, was treated for multiple otter bites while swimming in a California river. And this summer, a group of otters at the same beach bit and held underwater a golden retriever, who suffered fatal injuries. The Capital Regional District has now posted temporary "caution: otter in area" signs

on the beach in an attempt to raise awareness. (A CRD official told me there have been more reports of otters around dusk when beaches are closed.)

They've attacked dogs in the Okanagan. In 2019, a 36-kilogram (80-pound) lab cross was pulled underwater by four river otters in the Penticton Channel. The dog's owner told the Penticton Western News: "They came right to us and just stared at us. It was scary. They were not afraid—they were aggressive."

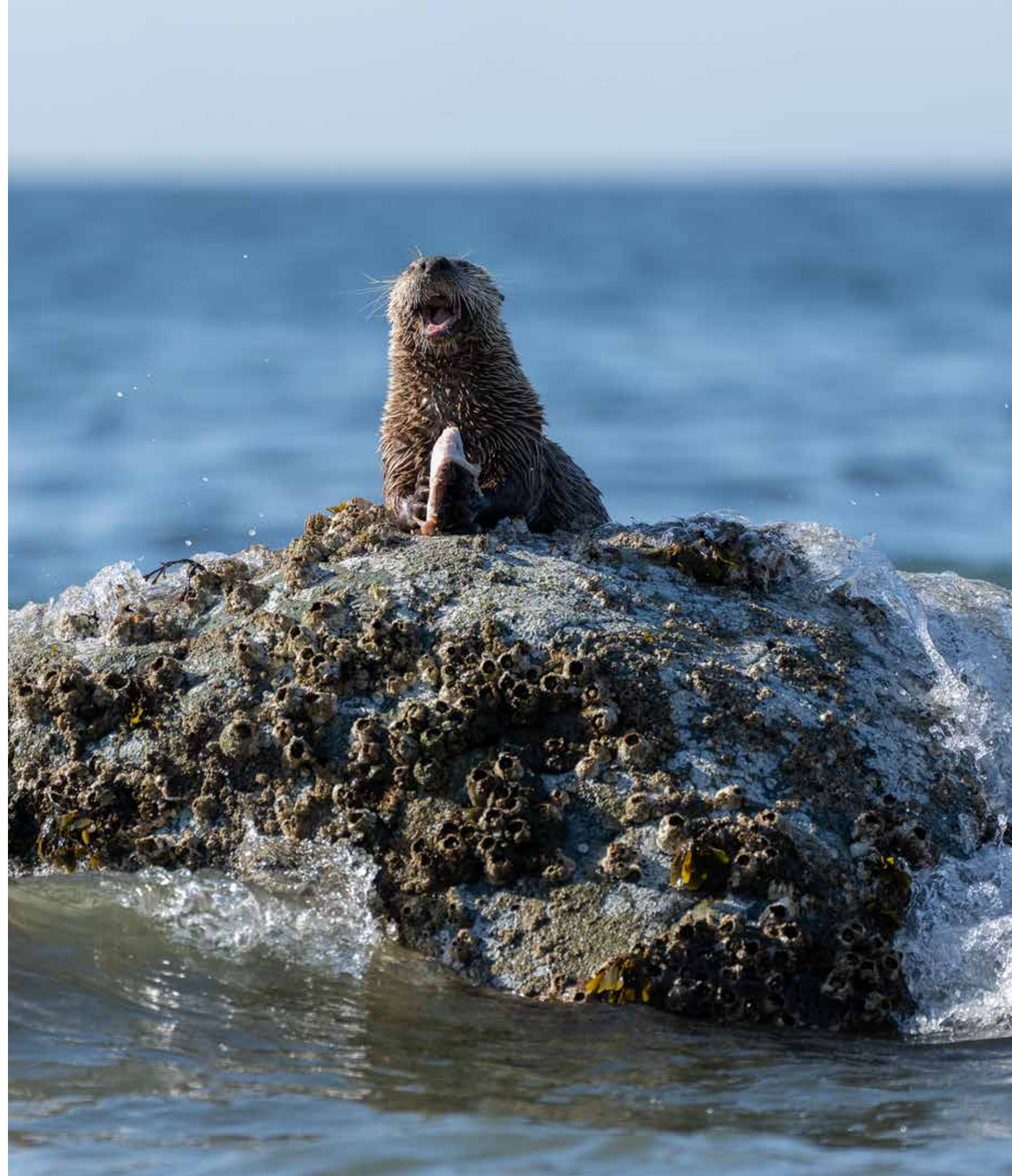
Wildlife experts concur. River otters can be quite aggressive, especially if they are in a pack and/or protecting their young—they usually give birth in the spring, so by winter, their offspring are learning the ropes.

"There are more canine and human attacks because we are encroaching in their space," says Andrea Wallace, BC SPCA's manager of wild animal welfare. "A dog dives in water to investigate and play, but the river otter sees a predator coming to attack so it goes on the defence."

In the otter's defence, Wallace says they aren't vicious. They are just being themselves, raising and feeding their kits for about a year until they're ready to go it alone. She sees them as inquisitive, intelligent, affectionate and playful.

"They're mustelids, part of the weasel family. And they're little terrors," says Lia McKinnon, stewardship biologist for the Okanagan Similkameen. "River otters are opportunistic predators and although their favourite catches are slow-moving bottom fish, they've been known to prey on bigger animals."

They aren't fussy eaters. According to the BC SPCA, they sometimes prey on domestic animals like rabbits, chickens, turkeys or ducks. They will also chow down on amphibians and sometimes birds. When ducks are ▶





moulting, they can't fly so well—easy pickings.

Conservationist and river otter researcher Heide Island knows from looking at otter feces that they also eat beavers, but they prefer fish. “River otters typically forage near the beach, 20 to 30 feet from the shore,” she says. “They don't dive deeper than 18 metres, so six metres below is their sweet spot for sculpin and other salt-water fish—which generally have more fat and nutrients than fresh-water fish—and where dogs retrieve balls and play, so there's an overlapping habitat.”

Island sees bigger issues at play in the rise of reported otter attacks. She calls out climate change and human activity for placing extra pressure on wildlife. “When hungry, stressed or threatened, animals are more likely to engage in defensive behavior,” Island says. “It may seem aggressive to us, but they are defending young, a territory, a den or some other food resource that they need to survive.”

Another reason for the rise in otter

attacks is that river otter populations in BC are currently stable or increasing, according to Nature Conservancy Canada. They were once threatened by over-harvesting by fur traders and until the 1970s, trapping wasn't frowned upon. River otters are still legally

trapped in BC from November 15 to February 28. According to the provincial government's furbearer management guidelines, in 2002-03, there were open trapping seasons province-wide, with season lengths ranging from 3.5 months in portions of the Lower

“Grand Theft Otter,” this river otter repeatedly broke into the Sun Yat-Sen Chinese Classical Garden in Vancouver and scarfed down 11 precious koi fish.
Bottom: Otters often litter docks with shells and poo.



RIVER OTTER CANADIAN DISTRIBUTION



Mainland Region to eight months in the northern (Skeena and Omineca-Peace) regions.

Its 2003 report says there have never been quotas, bag limits, or compulsory reporting or compulsory inspection requirements for otters anywhere in the province. Those apparently liberal regulations reflect the relatively low demand for otter pelts that has existed until recently, the rather specialized nature of otter trapping, and the relative inaccessibility of the species (beneath the ice) throughout much of the winter in most trapline areas.

Water pollution was also an issue. In the Okanagan, efforts to clean up the water and bring back salmon potentially helps otters. But development has increased around lakes and rivers and creeks, and water is where people—and otters—live and play. It's a no-brainer: increasing human population means more wildlife interaction.

At Victoria's Colquitz River, otters were using a salmon-counting trap as an all-you-can-eat buffet, which forced the conservation project to close. That really upset Bruce Bevan, an environ-

mental technician who counts fish for DFO, which serves as a measurement of the river's viability, of understanding the watershed's health and the coho's survival.

Bevan believes the otter population is increasing because we have made the environment more amenable for them to reproduce in protected areas. “Sometimes an otter is in a coho trap carrying off a fish and they are vicious. I watched two mating geese on my dock when, splash splunk, one of them disappeared: an otter took it under and only the otter surfaced. Environmental balances are out of whack, river otters are proliferating and the government doesn't recognize the problem. If I had my way I'd shoot 'em, but this ain't the wild west anymore.”

Not everyone would agree with Bevan. Ty Kent's photographs portray them as playful and fun-loving, swirling through the water performing acrobatics. His telephoto lens has focused on their “entertaining antics” since 2020.

“I see the same family or individuals in the morning at low tide. Typically,

WILDLIFE ETIQUETTE

When you're out with companion animals enjoying nature, Andrea Wallace urges you to be aware of wildlife for your safety and those of your pets and wildlife. Keeping your distance is key to avoid potentially dangerous interactions. “Train your dog to know one word so they will come back to you and not chase wildlife. And if you don't have an emergency recall, the best course of action is to keep dogs leashed, particularly at dawn and dusk when river otters are more active, when there are less people and you can't always see wildlife.”

Heide Island also has tips. “Avoid alcohol or drugs in the wilderness and respect wild animals, particularly when photographing. I am guilty of getting too close for that photo op. If you have disturbed their behavior or have eye contact, you're too close.”

Lia McKinnon also weighs in. “Observe all wildlife from at least 30 metres—about 100 feet. And bring a camera with zoom lens because you don't get great closeups with a cell phone.” And, it goes without saying, leave no trace.

one otter will climb onto a rock with a meal and two others show up,” says Kent. “I can get 30 to 40 feet away, but too much movement spooks them. I avoid eye contact, move slow and crouch and talk to them.”

Kent also photographs a single otter on a different beach near his home in Portland, Oregon. “It fishes, feeds and sleeps in a rock pile by the light-house. The otter lies on its back for a sand scrub, paws in the air staring at the sky. Then it naps and waddles to its den. I've seen them eating on a rock and jump up when an eagle dives with talons down to spook them into dropping their meal. They are highly intelligent.”

Granted, river otters have garnered a bad-boy rep as opportunistic rogues. ▶

For instance, the CBC News reported in 2018 a “Grand Theft Otter Case,” where one mammal brazenly and repeatedly broke into the Sun Yat-Sen Chinese Classical Garden in Vancouver and scarfed down 11 precious koi fish. And in 2020, about 1,000 endangered juvenile white sturgeon were released in the Nechako River, only to be found by a UNBC graduate student (who was looking for their miniscule identification tags) in the wily otters’ poop.

Graham Ellis is a retired marine mammal technician in Nanaimo, where he found a starving river otter that had crawled under a vehicle. “His mum was killed and he was very weak, only weighed four pounds,” says Ellis, who fed him for a year. He says the little guy, named Tarka, followed him around like a dedicated dog. He was always free to roam, but fish and wildlife people would not approve.

“I lived on my sailboat and after a while Tarka was able to catch fish, but he was too familiar with people,” Ellis says. Tarka frequented the Chowder House in Nanaimo, where Ellis discovered he was fed fish and chips. Tarka was too friendly and it was just a matter of time until an altercation happened. Ellis released Tarka on one of the Gulf Islands and never saw him again.

URBAN MYTHS? “The otters climb about 100 steps up a cliff from the ocean, through a Garry Oak meadow and to the pond in our courtyard, which has nothing in it except circulating water,” says Victoria condo owner Joanne Blain. “They swim a few lengths, discover there’s nothing there, then schlump across our lawn and back down the cliff. What are they looking for? How do they know there is even a pond there? They visit several times a year so if they’re return-

ing, they know we don’t have fish.” Blain and other residents suspect they may have been eating eggs from ducks nesting in the courtyard.

I relayed Blain’s questions to conservationist and river otter researcher Heide Island. She says the otters are cleaning salt from their pelage, which is the fur or hair of a mammal. “Pelage is necessary for thermal regulation and if it is soiled, meaning there are microscopic salt crystals in their fur, it prevents regulation,” she says. “Sea otters have the densest coat of any animal with one million hairs per square inch, the size of a postage stamp. River otters aren’t far behind, with 100,000 per square inch.” A human has 100,000 hairs on their entire scalp.

Dr. Jane Watson, marine ecologist at Vancouver Island University, isn’t so sure. She thinks the idea of getting salt off could be an urban myth. “They drink fresh water and like swimming



RIVER VS SEA OTTER



RIVER OTTER



SEA OTTER

Latin name	<i>Lontra Canadensis</i>	<i>Enhydra lutris</i>
Size	Weighs about 14 kg., about the size of a medium dog, and slimmer than sea otters.	Can be three times the size of river otters, weighing up to 45 kg.
Pelt	Dark brown fur.	Shades of brown fur with lighter head, throat and chest.
Tail	Tail is long and pointed, serpentine.	Tail is short and flattened.
In the Water	Usually swims in a dog paddle with claws on webbed feet, belly down with body mostly submerged.	Paddles with hind feet and tail, swims primarily on its back, floats high in the water.
On Land	Agile on land.	Rarely on land.
Eating & Sleeping	Eats and sleeps on land.	Eats while floating on its back. Sleeps sometimes holding hands in floating “rafts” of 20 or more animals.
Offspring	Has multiple pups.	Has a single pup.
Favourite Places	Mainly a landlubber. Goes where fish and seafood are: ponds and rivers, lakes and lagoons and the ocean.	Mostly lives in the water where it mates, gives birth, hunts and grooms.
Habitat	Lives around fresh-water rivers, lakes and wetlands throughout Canada. In BC, they can be found in the Georgia Depression and Coast and Mountain eco-provinces.	Found in the Pacific Ocean, inhabits the Goose Islands, off the central coast of BC, as well as areas around the northwest coast of Vancouver Island, mainly the area of the Brooks Peninsula.

in it. But why deliberately go up a hill to get salt off when they go back into the ocean? I don’t think they care that much,” she says.

If you live, work or play on the water, chances are river otters are your nemesis. They make a big mess on anything that holds a scent, which Andree St. Denis and her partner Tom know all too well. As paddlers, they almost always see these “magnificent but cheeky” creatures early in the morning or at dusk, eating their daily catch

and leaving behind shells and poop on the dock in Victoria. “You also know they’ve been here from the smell males love to leave behind,” she says.

“One day, Tom left a bag with food on the dock. He returned from paddling to find three otters playing around his bag, with the biggest one doing a four-legged stomp on it, tail straight up in the air, shooting poop and stinky gland smell onto the bag. Tom said the big guy (the size of a large terrier) looked over his shoulder

at him as if to say “this is my space.” Meanwhile, the two younger delinquents were cheering on the bigger one. Tom eventually shoed them off, but the big one got so close there could have been a brawl.

Tom hosed off the bag, but putting it in the car was his first mistake. Putting it in the washing machine was the second mistake. Andree says their basement reeked of manky, musty fish for weeks. Just another encounter with one of BC’s cutest terrors. 🦦