



LIGHTHOUSE PARK PRESERVATION SOCIETY

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The Natural History of Coastal River Otters by Cait Nelson



River Otter, *Lontra canadensis*

Photo: Cait Nelson

Although they do tend to be elusive, river otters share many environments with people. It seems that most people who live on the coast or near a body of water have had an encounter with a river otter.

The North American river otter is a semi-aquatic mammal in the weasel family (*Mustelidae*). Weasels, or mustelids, come in all shapes and sizes but all are carnivores and have scent glands. Other species in the family include marten, badger, mink, and wolverine. Otter species in this family include the giant river otter of South America and the sea otter (the only weasel without scent glands).



River otters on the coast are often mistaken for sea otters, *Enhydra lutris* (left) but there are easy ways to distinguish between them. River otters have very strong, slender bodies, sensitive whiskers and web feet. They forage in the ocean but den, sleep and have their offspring on land. Sea otters are larger and most of their activities are carried out in the ocean.

River otters are found across North America. Historic distribution would have covered the continent, but populations have crashed in many parts of the central US due to habitat degradation and pollution. Reintroductions and conservation efforts have been made and in several cases these efforts have worked but at high costs to wildlife agencies. As far as we know, river otter populations are doing well in the Pacific Northwest.

River otters forage in rivers, lakes and near-shore marine environments. Coastal river otters, also referred to as marine foraging river otters, forage exclusively in the marine environment. This characteristic makes them ecologically distinct from river otters that forage in fresh water systems, but they are the same species.

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Lighthouse Park Preservation Society is a membership based non-profit organization formed in 1998 to:

- Protect the natural integrity of Lighthouse Park;
- Promote public awareness of its natural features;
- And support the development of biological zones near the park boundaries.

President - Alexandra Mancini

Vice President - Jeff Marliave

Past Pres. - Marja de Jong Westman

Treasurer - Nick Miller

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Ann Crosby

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WEST VANCOUVER
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THE NATURAL HISTORY OF COASTAL RIVER OTTERS

by Cait Nelson

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River otters can hold their breath and stay under water for long periods of time because of a “dive response” that slows the circulatory and respiratory systems. These characteristics make them excellent predators of aquatic environments. Their diet might include small intertidal fish, like prickly-backs and gunnels, larger sub-tidal fish like greenling and rockfish and crustaceans like shrimp and crabs. They are usually solitary hunters but will sometimes team up to target larger prey species. This is called cooperative foraging. Due to the abundance of prey on the coast, coastal river otters travel short distances to find the food they need and therefore tend to have smaller home ranges relative to river otters inhabiting fresh water systems.

There are rare accounts of predators like orcas, cougars and wolves preying on river otters, but their main predators are humans and mink. Humans have traditionally trapped river otters for their pelts. These days pelts are not as valuable so most of the trapping is by nuisance trappers hired to remove them from private property. Mink prey on baby river otters in the den sites.

River otter activity is usually indicated by the presence of latrine sites. These can be used for socializing and most importantly for scent marking as a form of communication. Scent marking is used to establish territory or communicate the availability of resources, like a good fishing spot. Latrines allow biologists to study otter ecology through scat sampling, which does not disrupt the animals’ natural behaviour.



River Otters

Photo: Jared Hobbs

River otters use natural materials like dense vegetation or rock piles for their dens and usually locate them within daily reach of fresh water. When females are ready to have their young they typically move inland to establish natal dens, possibly in crawl spaces under homes or out buildings. Females avoid scent marking these sites to keep them safe and hidden from predators. Some research suggests that a female’s primary behavioural driver is access to food, while a male’s primary driver is access to females. Otters breed in the late spring or early summer soon after the females have given birth. Like many other mustelids, they have delayed implantation. The embryos do not develop until implanted in the uterine wall several months later. The reason for this is to wait for suitable conditions to return after the winter months. Once the fertilized egg implants, development occurs over approximately 60 days. One to three young kits, occasionally up to five, are born in April or May. They are weaned at about six months and remain with the mother until the following breeding season, or when the next year’s kits are born. At that point otters might be solitary or travel in social groups. Their life span is approx 7-8 years in the wild, 9-10 years in captivity.

River otters have a very important role in their ecosystem. As a top predator of a marine-based food web, they help to maintain ecosystem stability. Just as the river otter relies on the lower food chain for food, the lower organisms rely on predators to keep the ecosystem in balance. For this reason, river otters are ideal biological monitors for ecosystem health and function. If the top predators are stable, it is a good sign that the ecosystem is functioning properly.

A SPECIAL THANK YOU

by Alexandra Mancini

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Our Society would not be where it is today without the tremendous contributions of two recently retired Board members, May Loudon and Elspeth Bradbury. These amazing ladies are powerhouses of great ideas, enthusiasm, and energy. They make things happen!

May's appreciation for Lighthouse Park goes back to the 1960s when she would bring her Brownie pack to the park and hold meetings on a rocky outcrop. As the Nature Advisor for the West Vancouver Division of the Girl Guides, she helped organize nature training sessions in the park for many years. In the early 1980s, May and the WVGs collaborated with Kay Smith, Nancy Anderson, and Kay Beamish, editors of the Vancouver Natural History Society's book entitled *Nature West Coast, As Seen in Lighthouse Park*. Phyl Munday was also one of the Girl Guides involved with this collaboration that sparked the initiative to create a Nature House to educate the public about this precious park. For this purpose, May helped acquire the use of a park building, which eventually became the Phyl Munday House. Starting out with no money, only enthusiasm and willing helpers, they negotiated with municipal and Girl Guide lawyers to write up a license to occupy. The huge canopy over the big old stove in the kitchen was ripped out and a volunteer created the current good kitchen. They saved the wonderful big table. Kiwanis volunteers painted all the walls and others scrubbed. A grant from West Vancouver United Church helped to cover costs. It was officially opened in 1985 with a ceremony attended by 70-80 people who had supported the initiative in some way. What a huge accomplishment! When the Guides decided to open their facility to the public, May took on the responsibility of seeking out and scheduling volunteers to host the nature room on Sunday afternoons. Almost three decades later, the Nature House is still open on Sundays and continues to delight and educate park visitors.

Ever a lover of the natural world, May's observations and experience in Lighthouse Park over a period of more than 35 years contributed greatly to the idea of forming a society to protect the park. As a founding member of LPPS in 1998, May's knowledge and presence at those formative meetings was vital. She was a dedicated board member for 10 of the past 15 years, acting as Treasurer for the past 8 years with tremendous assistance from her husband (thank you Ian!). May's thoughts on nature education have contributed immensely to the overall pursuit of the Society's goals.

Elspeth and her husband Ray have cherished the beauty of Lighthouse Park since moving to West Vancouver 25 years ago. Elspeth became an official LPPS Board member in 2006, but she was very active in the Society's leadership long before that. She helped with the weed pulls, which started in 2002, and soon assumed the leading role for organizing those events. Since January 2004, she and Elaine Graham have edited and produced our biannual newsletters.

Without Elspeth's extensive knowledge and experience as a landscape architect, the restoration of Beacon Trail would not have been such a great success. Over 3000 native plants were planted over a five year period, thanks mainly to Elspeth's brilliant idea of "Adopt-a-Pot", which reached out to the public for their support in nurturing seedlings of native plants propagated by Elspeth herself. Approximately half of the new plants were home grown! She contributed to restoration planning for portions of North Piccadilly Park and was proactive in requesting the protection of the camas meadow in Caulfeild Park. Following on from the success of the Beacon Trail restoration, Elspeth led the restoration of the old pilot house garden site in Caulfeild Park with the same precise planning and serious energy.

On top of these projects Elspeth also found time to plan and direct an LPPS-sponsored art show in January 2007 with Lyn Noble, a second art show in September 2010 and a photographic exhibition of WV's Six-Park Network in 2011-12. These successful events drew attention to the Society in a very creative way. Elspeth's financial support for the LPPS has been our largest source of income ever. She very generously donated all the proceeds from her 2007 book entitled *West Vancouver, A View Through The Trees*. Among other uses, these monies allowed the creation of our portable display and the six interpretive signs installed in Lighthouse Park, which will be enjoyed by visitors for many years to come.

Although we will miss having these fine women on our Board of Directors, we know they will continue to be actively involved in our Society in the years ahead. I extend our sincerest thanks to them for everything they have done for our Society and the parks.

EARS & EYES ON THE BIRDS OF LIGHTHOUSE PARK

by Suann Hosie

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2014 will mark the tenth anniversary of our monthly bird census. Strictly a volunteer project, these bird counts are a chance to help monitor trends in population and distribution of the various species of birds that are found in the park. The first Sunday of the month brings a number of participants to the upper parking lot early in the morning, rain or shine, holiday weekend or not. Covering the usual route takes about two and a half hours. The pace is leisurely, with many stops to listen for bird sounds.

It is always interesting to follow each species through its seasonal cycle. Some birds are residents – that is, they live within the park year-round. Examples of resident species are Common Ravens, Brown Creepers, Barred Owls, Pileated Woodpeckers, Anna's hummingbirds and Pacific wrens. The birds that pass through in the spring and fall are classified as migrants. They often present a surprise. On August 4th this year, our group encountered a mixed flock of migratory birds. The mixture included resident chickadees but it was delightful to see Yellow-rumped Warblers, as well as Townsend's and Black-throated Grey Warblers and Cedar Waxwings – all were feeding voraciously on their meals-of-choice, packing in the extra calories they would need for their migration south. Berries and fruits were ripe for the waxwings and robins and the hot weather and the abundant sugar source produced insects for the chickadees and warblers.

On the same count, while at Shore Pine point, we were treated to a double-barrelled sighting: a Belted Kingfisher perched on a seaside rock at low tide; and then, minutes later, a migrating MacGillivray's Warbler zapped from across Howe Sound into the bushes near where we were standing. Luckily, we were able to draw this pretty warbler out for excellent views.

Both resident and migrant birds nest and raise young in the park. During the spring and summer, it is fascinating to watch fledglings being fed by their parents, or simply hearing the begging squawks, "Feed me, feed me!" The finding of nests is exciting, too. We are always careful not to disturb the adults or the chicks. Nests we have found include those of the Common Raven, Red-breasted Nuthatch and Pileated Woodpecker.

A "wow" moment occurred this April when we saw an enormous group of Surf Scoters off Shore Pine point – they were "rafting" as they grouped for the migration north. There were two huge rafts, one close to us, the other between the park and Bowen Island. We counted over 4000. A day later, they were gone. Having a spotting scope to observe the sea birds is an advantage and is definitely a help

when we set our gaze on the small islets, known as the Grebe Islets, located off the northwest shore of the park. I usually bring mine for all to share.

Each month's count will find new participants joining us – all are welcome and there is no obligation to participate every month. Some of the regulars are Hugh Hamilton, Areta Sanders, Ed Donaldson, Paola Merkins, Patricia Lepp and Elaine Graham. I wish I could list them all; but we all share information and consider the first Sunday of the month as a chance to exchange stories and anecdotes during the walk.



Bird Counters, Ed, Areta & Hugh photo: Paola Merkins

MONTHLY BIRD COUNTS

Meet at the upper kiosk in the Lighthouse Park parking lot.

First Sunday of every month:

7:30 a.m. Sept. 1st

8:30 a.m. Oct. 6th, Nov. 3rd, Dec. 1st,

2014 - Jan. 5th, Feb. 2nd.

Contact Suann at suannhosie@gmail.com to be added to the monthly count notice.

For all volunteer events please wear old clothes, sturdy shoes and work gloves.

SATURDAY, SEPT. 21, 9:00 a.m. - Noon IVY PULL, TRAILS PARK

Meet at the lower kiosk in Lighthouse Park parking lot.

SATURDAY, SEPT. 28, 9:00 a.m. - Noon GREAT CDN. SHORELINE CLEAN-UP, STARBOAT COVE, LIGHTHOUSE PARK

Meet at the upper kiosk in Lighthouse Park parking lot.
Please bring your own bottled water and snack.

SATURDAY, OCT. 5, 9:00 a.m. - Noon RESTORATION, JUNIPER LOOP, LHP

Meet at the Juniper Loop trailhead in the parking lot.

SATURDAY, OCT. 19, 9:00 a.m. - Noon PLANTING & IVY PULL, CAULFEILD PARK

Meet at the anchor restoration site.

SATURDAY, NOV. 16, 9:00 a.m. - Noon, IVY PULL, NORTH PICCADILLY PARK

Meet at the corner of North Piccadilly & Clovelly Walk.

SATURDAY, NOV. 30, 9:00 a.m. - Noon IVY PULL, LIGHTHOUSE PARK

Meet at the upper kiosk in Lighthouse Park parking lot.

EAGLE NEST SIGHTED in LIGHTHOUSE PARK by David Cook

On Sunday, August 4th, 2013, while walking along the Juniper Loop trail in Lighthouse Park I heard Bald Eagles calling in a way that I have learnt to associate with greeting between individuals when one is returning to an occupied nest. The sounds led me to their old nest site in the old-growth Douglas-fir next to the "living stump" near the intersection of Juniper Loop with Seven Sisters trail. When I reached the base of the tree I realized that a pair of Bald Eagles was actively nesting there as fresh food debris littered the forest floor. After some scrambling around I found a vantage point from which the nest was visible. Sitting near the nest was a fledged juvenile eagle. The timing was fortuitous as nesting season was drawing to a close and the eagles would have left the nest site a few days later.

The last time I saw evidence of eagle activity at this site was July 18th, 2010 when I noticed fresh food debris at the base of the tree. At that time I did not see a nest nor hear any eagles nearby.

I have been monitoring Bald Eagle nest sites on the North Shore since 2000 and have noted a declining success rate due mainly to disturbance around nests as well as removal of nest trees due to the relentless advancement of human development. While the food sources of Bald Eagles on the North Shore remain excellent the supply of suitable nest trees is declining. For this reason, eagle authority David Hancock and I have been spotting suitable sites for artificial nests and have to date placed one between the Pioneer grain terminal and Lonsdale Avenue.



The eagle nest is at this location on Juniper Loop where the living stump stands beside the nest tree, an old-growth Douglas-fir.
photo: David Cook

*Arbutus menziesii*

Photo: Rob Roy McGregor

HIDDEN THREATS to ARBUTUS TREES

with

ROB ROY MCGREGOR, B.Sc.**SATURDAY, OCTOBER 12th, 2013****2:00 - 4:00 p.m.****Sk'iwitsut Hut, Lighthouse Park**

Rob Roy McGregor's research into the apparent decline of arbutus trees includes studies to clarify the host range of the primary pathogen causing cankers on arbutus in Lighthouse Park.

Mr. McGregor will bring us up-to-date on the result of his survey samples of arbutus trees in Lighthouse Park. Following a short talk, we will walk to some of the affected trees in the park.

CONSERVATION of BLACK BEARS

with

DR. TONY HAMILTON**SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 2nd, 2013****1:30 - 3:30 p.m.****Welsh Hall,****West Vancouver Memorial Library**

As B.C. Environment Ministry's senior biologist, Dr. Tony Hamilton has been involved with the study and conservation of many of B.C.'S large mammals for over 30 years. Tony comes to speak to LPPS on the natural history and conservation issues of black bears - common neighbours of many of the North Shore's human residents.

