



Sea Otter (*Enhydra lutris*) Confirmed in the Northern Strait of Georgia, British Columbia

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Between 24 April and 1 May 2016, a group of five Resource Management Officer Technology students from Vancouver Island University in Nanaimo, BC, embarked on a week-long practicum of field studies and volunteer biology programs on Mitlenatch Island Nature Park (Figure 1). This provincial park, designated in 1961 to protect the largest colony of nesting seabirds in the Strait of Georgia, is located

about 10 km southeast of Campbell River, BC, on Vancouver Island (10U 356261E 535034N). The field trip was part of the Mitlenatch Island Stewardship Team program (MIST).

At noon on 26 April, the students were surveying an intertidal beach and had walked along the rocky shore from “Northwest” Bay to an area just below the bird blind near “Harlequin” Bay (Figure 2). They

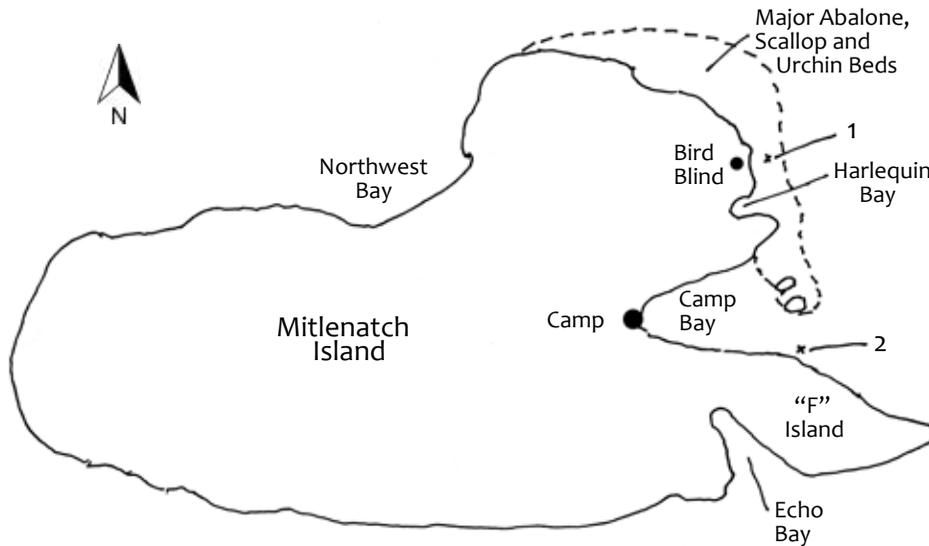


Figure 1. Sketch of major localities on Mitlenatch Island Nature Park with locations of two Sea Otter observations on 26 April (1) and 27 April (2). The dotted line designates the area where abalones, scallops, urchins, and sea cucumbers are most plentiful on the island. *Modified from Campbell and Kennedy (1966).*



Figure 2. Location of the first sighting of Sea Otter (1) off north side of Mitlenatch Island Nature Park, BC. Note wooden bird blind in centre of photograph. *Photo by Ken Kennedy, 9 May 2016.*

noticed a group of about 20 Harbour Seals (*Phoca vitulina*) in the water about 25 m from shore. After closer examination through binoculars, they realized that one of the curious marine mammals was actually a Sea Otter (*Enhydra lutris*). It appeared to be by itself, floating on its back unlike the seals (Figures 3 and 4). After watching the Sea Otter for a few minutes, it was spooked by a Steller Sea Lion (*Eumetopias jubatus*)

swimming nearby and dove under the water.

The next morning, a Sea Otter observed swimming around the eastern side of the island in front of “Camp” Bay, was assumed to be the same otter (Figure 3). The photograph was added to the provincial photo-records file for rare vertebrate records (see Campbell and Stirling (1971).



Figure 3. Sea Otter, a very rare mammal in the Strait of Georgia, BC, was first spotted swimming on its back among a group of Harbour Seals (left). It later showed its characteristic large head and blunt snout and thick set of vibrissae on its muzzle. *Photos by Ashley Spencer, “Northwest Bay”, Mitlenatch Island Nature Park, 26 April 2016. BC Photo 4141.*



Figure 4. During its two-day stay, the Sea Otter frequented the northeast side of Mitlenatch Island Nature Park, BC. *Photo by Ken Kennedy, entrance to ‘Camp Bay’, 27 April 2016. BC Photo 4142.*

Sea Otter is frequently confused with Northern River Otter (*Lontra canadensis*), both of which are large members of the weasel family. The body of a Sea Otter is twice as large as a river otter’s, it rarely leaves the water and feeds and sleeps on the ocean. It often floats on its back and feeds on prey placed on its belly, has large webbed feet like flippers, and feeds primarily on crabs, clams, sea urchins, abalones,



Figure 5. Unlike Sea Otter, Northern River Otter hauls out on land, often a rock, to feed. *Photo by Jared Hobbs.*

and snails (Ford 2014). The Northern River Otter inhabits marine and fresh-water habitats, swims on its belly, eats on land, a rock, or a log, sleeps in underground dens, and primarily eats fishes (Figure 5) but opportunistically feeds on a wide variety of other animals including nesting seabirds (Hatler et al. 2008, Rodway et al. in press).

Sea Otter is a remarkable example of a conservation success story. The species was driven to the brink of extinction throughout much of its range in the northeastern Pacific Ocean by fur traders in the 18th and 19th centuries. It was extirpated from British Columbia by 1929. Between 1969 and 1972, 89 Sea Otters were reintroduced by government biologists to Checleset Bay on the west coast of Vancouver Island. Over the following years the animals dispersed north and south and by 2001 the minimum population was estimated at 3,180 Sea Otters, most (84%) spread along the west coast of Vancouver Island (Nichol 2007).

Extra-liminal records in the early 1970s included a single Sea Otter seen at Cape St. James at the southern tip of Haida Gwaii (formerly Queen Charlotte Islands), BC, on 25 and 28 July 1972 (Edie 1973). In addition, several southern records extended the range along the west coast of Vancouver Island at Bordelais Island (near Cape Beale) on 2 August 1970, Helby Island on 12 August 1970, near Ahous Point (Vargas Island) on October 1971, and Cleland Island on 18 July 1971 (Hatler 1972). More recently, single Sea Otters are being infrequently reported near Sooke and on 15 August 2014 one was observed feeding on urchins and crabs off Ten Mile Point in Haro Strait, Saanich (Petrescu 2014).

Sea Otter still remains a very rare mammal in the Strait of Georgia (Salish Sea), an area about 6,800 km² between Vancouver Island and the British Columbia mainland. Ford (2014) lists two sites (without details); the extreme north end of the Strait and off Lasqueti Island. The record for Mitlenatch Island lies between these locations. The legal boundaries of Mitlenatch Island Nature Park extend to 300 m from the shore to protect marine life including Northern Abalone (*Haliotis kamtschatkana*), Giant Rock Scallop (*Crassadoma gigantea*), Sea Cucumber (*Parastichopus californicus*), and Giant Sea Urchin (*Strongylocentrotus franciscanus*; Figure 6), prey preferred by Sea Otter.

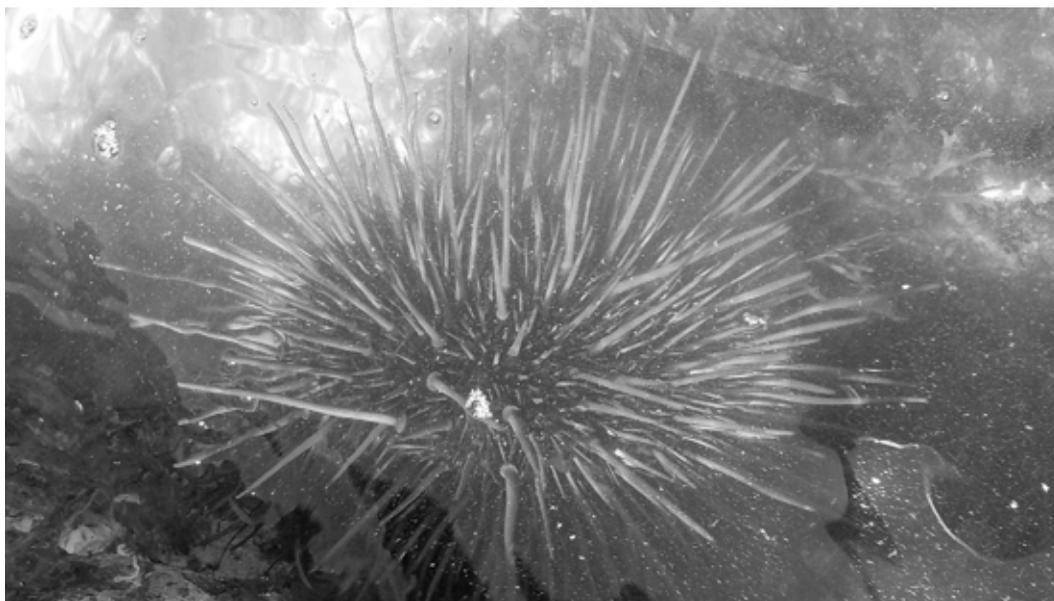


Figure 6. The subtidal Giant Sea Urchin is a staple in the diet of Sea Otters at some locations in British Columbia. *Photo by Ken Kennedy, Mitlenatch Island, BC, 3 July 2015.*

It was both exciting and fascinating to witness such an unusual sighting of a Sea Otter exploring the waters around Mitlenatch Island. †

Acknowledgements

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Figure 7. Students, on boat trip to Mitlenatch Island, from left to right, are Teagan Wardrop, Becki LaForge, Avryl Brophy, Ashley Spencer and Paul Farrugia. *Photo by Ken Kennedy, 24 April 2016.*

About the Authors

Teagen, Ashley, Becki, Avryl, and Paul were first-year students enrolled in the Resource Management Officer Technology course at Vancouver Island University in Nanaimo, BC (Figure 7).

Ken (Figure 8) has been keenly interested in the natural world and nature interpretation for over 50 years. Wayne Campbell and he were provincial park naturalists on Mitlenatch Island in 1965 and 1966 and constructed the original driftwood cabin that serves as a base for those that followed and for those who continue to study and protect the island's resident wildlife.

Since 2014, Ken has helped with stewardship and education on Mitlenatch Island. Each spring he coordinates a week-long course on marine life on the island and mentors students from Vancouver Island University. He also serves as a day tour guide for the BC Nature camp in May. Ken serves as manager of facilities on the island for MIST which is supported by BC Parks. After Ken helps set up camp in late March, MIST volunteers are active on the island until late September.



Figure 8. For two years, Ken introduced and supervised students from Vancouver Island University studying wildlife on Mitlenatch Island Nature Park. *Photo by Dora Korzuchowska, Campbell Valley Regional Park, Langley, BC, 19 August 2014.*