

# MONTEREY NEWS

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## Watching Otters, Remembering Coco

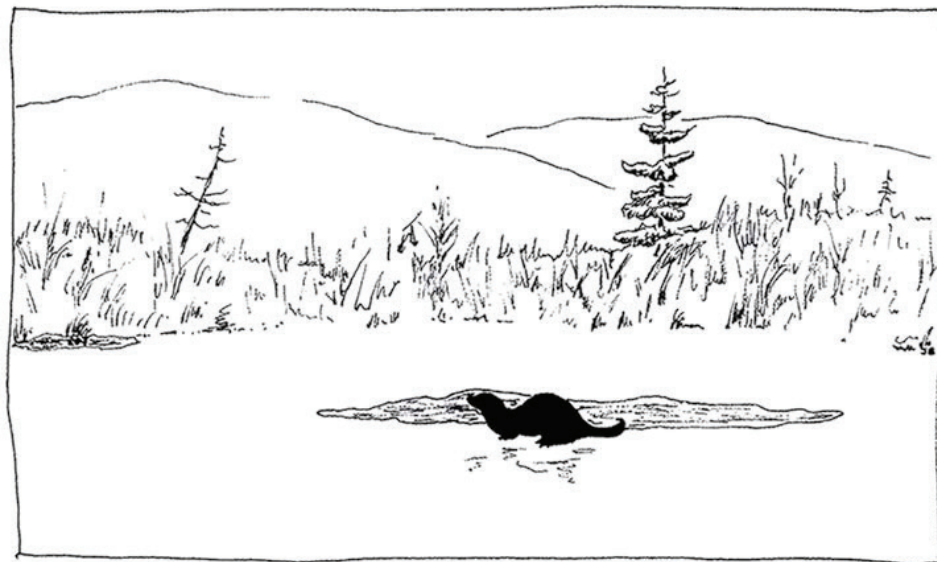
This is April, spring is jumping out all over, and for many it is a time of mating, of egg-laying, of nest-building, of birth. The otters around here are bringing “pups” into the world, usually two or three per mom. There is a pond just east of our place where I have been watching adult otters for some weeks. They have been easy to see, dark against the ice, where there are several open “blowholes,” as I call them. Sometimes there would be three big adults, just lolling near the hole, then one or two would slip down into the water. Maybe all three would vanish. In only twenty seconds one or more would pop back up, often all the way out onto the ice, bringing a fish or crayfish to eat, for a picnic.

In short order, that snack would be gone. Maybe the otters would sit and visit awhile, but more often, back they would go, one after another, to the grocery store under the ice.

Sometimes I would get to the pond in early afternoon and it looked like the otters had been out of the water for awhile, maybe drying out in the sun a bit, looking more silvery. But when they first come up out of the water they are gleaming black. As the days went by, I wondered how long the food supply would last. So far it has been a few weeks.

Otters are mustelids, members of the same family as weasels, skunks, martens, fishers, badgers, and the big wolverines. All these animals eat meat, and for otters this is mainly fish, but also frogs, crayfish, shellfish, turtles, snakes, birds, and birds' eggs. They hunt in the water, where they are faster and more agile than any fish. Both front and hind feet are webbed and the big males may weigh twenty-five pounds, with a total length of nearly five feet. Of this the long strong tail is a foot or a foot and a half.

When the ice is gone and an otter is out in open water wanting to look around, he can poke his head up and tread water, sometimes just using those strong hind legs and feet so the head, neck, front legs and chest are up above the surface. This is the periscope in the long body design. Though otters are supreme athletes, they do not look built for life on land. To be fifty-four inches long and only



nine inches at the shoulder seems like it would involve dragging the unsupported middle. But “dragging” is not the word!

On land or on ice or snow, otters can travel fast by tobogganing. They take a few running steps and then launch themselves forward, front legs back at their sides. In the snow you can see where they have given another surge by pumping with the hind feet. Run and slide, run and slide. They love tobogganing down a steep hill into water, especially on a clay riverbank, and develop favorite “slides” where they return for fun. Observers and writers say that whenever they have watched otters at play like this, on a bank slide, it has never been a solo otter. Rather there are always two or more, playing together.

Otters are particularly playful and sociable, throughout their lives. In his 1909 *Life-histories of Northern Animals*, Ernest Thompson Seton writes:

“It is the rule for young animals to play together, and occasionally the full-grown will indulge in a good-natured sham fight or a chase, for sport, but this is the only case I know of among American quadrupeds where the entire race, young and old, unite to keep an institution that is not connected in any way with the instincts of feeding, fighting, or multiplying, but is simply maintained as amusement.”

Some people, one way or another, have had an otter for a pet. I am of a generation

lucky as a kid to have come upon the book *Ring of Bright Water*, by Gavin Maxwell. I fell in love with otters before I'd ever seen one. Years went by and I was in Mexico with my two young children, riding in the back of a pick-up truck on the way to a river trip. The truck stopped at a café/house and a man came out with a furry animal in his arms. “Coco!” he said, “un perro de agua.”

This was a half-grown otter and the next thing I knew he was in my arms, snuggling, nuzzling into my elbow. He was like a kid in a sleeping bag, horsing around, only the sleeping bag was his own dense coat.

I held his webbed hind foot and it was soft and delicate and warm. His foot was impossibly sensitive. I was so moved by this I didn't know what to say, but he put me right at my ease with some of his “jokes,” like this: “Ur...ur...urrrr (snuffle!) Mm, mm, ur... ur... ur...urrrr!” And as I stroked his head he suddenly rolled over in one liquid turn and ever so gently took my hand in his mouth. Coco held my hand, explored my fingers, flattered me with his attentions and good manners. In the end I had to give him back.

Gavin Maxwell the writer, Seton the biologist and artist, and Coco perro de agua, I thank you. You still speak to me and make me smile, like the otters down the road from here. — Bonner McAllester