

## Natural Life of the Lost Coast

# We 'Otters' learn about otters

By Kim A. Cabrera

Crunch, crunch. The young otter's sharp teeth made short work of the pikeminnow it clutched in its webbed paws. I was four feet away, up to my neck in the Eel River near Redway Beach. The little otter's two companions had taken one look at the strange creature (me) and hidden in the brush above us. This otter apparently classified me as no threat and took the opportunity to eat the fish without having to share with its siblings. It made a great photo opportunity for me, because wild otters seldom allow humans to get so close.

The river otter is a native species in the Eel River and its tributaries. Otters are relatives of weasels and share some characteristics with their cousins. They have long, slender bodies with short legs. An otter's tail is long and is used to help it swim. Their fur is thick and keeps them warm even when wet. An otter can close its nostrils to keep water out when swimming. The large feet have webbed toes, which help them swim with ease. An otter in the water is a joy to watch. They move so smoothly and gracefully.

River otters, like some of their weasel cousins, use scent to communicate among members of their species. They do this in several ways. One way is by making scent mounds. An otter will scrape together a mound of mud, grass, and debris, then it will deposit musky-scented urine or feces on top. Otter scent glands can produce a yellowish secretion that is quite pungent. Another method is to use their scat, or droppings. Otters develop favorite sites along the river that they use as latrines. These latrines



**A young otter munches on a pikeminnow.**

serve as otter "post offices." Each time an otter passes this location, it will stop to investigate any fresh deposits, and leave some of its own. Latrines are located in easy pull-out locations, and sometimes even on steeper areas, always adjacent to the water. Often, you will smell it before you see it.

River otter tracks show five toes, often with the webs visible. The toes appear more bulbous than those of the raccoon, and can appear pointed due to the closeness of the claw mark to the toe mark. The hind feet can be slightly larger than the front ones. The inner toe is smallest, and sometimes does not leave an imprint, which can make these tracks easy to confuse with canine tracks. Always take into account the habitat when identifying tracks. That will help you sort out the puzzling one.

Otters eat a variety of prey. A partial list includes crayfish (a favorite), fish, turtles, amphibians, and many species of aquatic invertebrates. They will travel overland away from water, so their prey can include

small mammals and even birds.

A decade-long otter study by Dr. Jeff Black at HSU encourages citizen scientists to report their otter observations. If you see otters in local rivers, please report your sightings by visiting his otter report web page at: <http://www.humboldt.edu/wildlife/faculty/black/research/ottersentry.html>

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*This article is part of a series about natural life on the Lost Coast, sponsored by the Lost Coast Interpretive Association which may be contacted at [lost-coastassoc@gmail.com](mailto:lost-coastassoc@gmail.com). If you are interested in contributing an article to this bi-weekly column about the plants, animals and human history of the Lost Coast Region, contact Cathy Miller at [cathymiller50@gmail.com](mailto:cathymiller50@gmail.com).*