

The Discovery of the "Extinct" Sea Otter

Rosalind Sharpe Wall, a long-time Peninsula resident, was recently rummaging through some of the effects of her late father's, when she came upon this account of a most astounding event. The event, of course, was her father's discovery of the 'extinct' sea otter. Howard Granville Sharpe, a published author since the late '20s, wrote this first person account in 1939.

By HOWARD GRANVILLE SHARPE

"How did you discover the sea otter herd?" Many such questions are asked of me. At the time of the discovery, March 19, 1938, I owned a small ranch on the rugged coast 13 miles south of Carmel.

On my front porch, at cliff-edge, stood a powerful telescope commanding sea and shore. From a 300 feet elevation it swept Discovery Cope and Sharpe's Point. Jutting into the ocean, this promontory forms a cove.

In a busy day I found no time for systematic scope-gazing, but might succumb if only to inspect some passing ship, or an outlying rock "Lady Kay." On this historic morning I had no definite object, but I wondered if Lady Kay would be weeping. If brine rivulets coursed her cheeks, a truculent tide was slapping her face.

I scanned kelp beds lying farther inshore. Slight movements there seemed inconsistent with normal rise and fall. I had no premonition that I was verging on a discovery destined to draw an army of spectators from the farthest reaches of the Earth. Certainly I couldn't know that I would find a cool million dollars in furs, or be first to gaze at a sight unseen by mortals in a century.

To "Coasters" living in rugged Bixby Creek Canyon, objects riding the swell in a high tide aren't kelp. Today such float was visible, objects too uniform in size for the usual flotsam. Movement obviously was independent of the tide. Were they alive? Heads larger than kelp-bulbs resembled seal, sleek bodies seemed fur-bearing. But here similarities ended. What were those odd shaped flippers that seemed growing from their backs? One object wriggled and turned over, then I realized that all the rest were inverted, lazy on their backs in patches of yellow-brown kelp. Distance from a sandy beach at Bixby Creek mouth was scarcely 120 yards.

Could they be walrus? Perhaps some odd species, fooled by a severe winter, mistook California for Alaska? No tusks? Then perhaps a "half fist, half horse, half alligator" had Davy Crocketted up from unexplored seas. These creatures were undeniably fur-bearers...

A strange excitement took hold of me. Puzzle: what salt water creature lies luxuriously on its back, hind legs sticking straight up, forelegs folded on its chest or muzzle? Some kind of otter?

I remembered a personal encounter with a land otter in the Far East long ago. It was a far cry from that steaming episode in a tropical lake on Mindanao in the Philippines to my balcony at Rainbow Headlands. But I was determined to know, little dreaming how much there was to know and that it would make me the target for rifle bullets within a few days. Yes, indeed. The world might never have heard of my discovery but for my remembrance of that land otter episode.

The idea of this large herd of fur-bearers being genuine sea otters didn't, couldn't occur to me, because the myriads once thriving in kelp along the coast were all dead. Such at least was the scientific verdict. In other words, "Southern Sea Otter" described as "Latex" or "Enhydra Lutris Nereis Merriam," were definitely wiped off scientific records, to fill a niche in natural history with a freakish group as dead as dodos. Could they be prehistoric, up from ocean deeps?

If I tired of scope gazing, the little rascals proved a magnet drawing me back. I called to a young employee:

"Do you see what see?"

Did he? A strange question in the midst of workday affairs. But his good nature took over, he saw even more, not only verifying my "spike tails and four genuine legs instead of flippers," but he saw that the feet were partly webbed, five nails to each foot, faces like "muskrats." Also, an outlying group mistaken by me for kelp, was animal life instead. This brought my estimate up to more than 300 of the amazing creatures. Later, when my family members arrived, I showed them the discovery.

The next person to see the extraordinary sight was a Mr. Frank Miller who chanced to drive out from Monterey. The press had it: "A countryman discovered the sea otters, but Capt. Lippincott, of the Fish & Game Commission, who happened to be passing, told him that they were..."

It was two days later that on a trip to town we reported the discovery to Hopkins Marine Station. Everywhere we met a skepticism quite understandable even when tinged with amusement.

"Seals...Sea Lions...Nothing else."

Ditto four officials of the Fish and Game Commission. Our "find" left them cold. Also, three newspaper editors must have "seen no merit in our contention," for not a word appeared on a subject which, within three days, was to become world news astounding, [??] and within limits of natural science "the scoop of the century."

Two days later we paid a second call on Fish & Game, with the same result.

"Can't possibly be anything but seals or sea lions," was the considered verdict. Veteran officer Capt. Lippincott asked:

"How do you know they aren't seals or sea lions?"

This attitude swatted my self esteem rather rudely. I replied:

"They don't look like seals...nor sea lions."

By now I should have realized that my layman's opinions weren't worth much. I ran across Mr. (Frank) Miller who told me that his reports met with like skepticism.

Lippincott pondered over my story. Next morning with three juniors he appeared at Rainbow Headlands at my ranch. They peered through the scope, there came an odd silence. One officer wiped the lens, peered again. Lippincott backed away, hand across eyes. Looking at the object glass he adjusted the eyepiece to shorter focus. Gradually his body grew taut; voice came in a sharp whisper

"Sea otters...sea-OTTERS!"

Finally I asked: "Are you sure?"

"How could I mistake? There can be no doubt!"

"But they're all dead...extinct...years ago?"

Lippincott smiled grimly. In years of service he had seen freak happenings. Truly a new chapter in natural history was about to be written: the "impossible" had happened. A supposedly extinct animal came to life utterly without warning; a large herd with a cool million dollars in pelts. first time in history. Nature's immutable law was: "Once extinct, always extinct..." Of species dying out in our particular epoch: great auk and dodo by 1800, Mississippi Valley pigeon; Martha's Vineyard sagehen: there was no question of the accuracy of the diagnosis. But these were all birds, whereas bison, West Coast hyena, and the sperm whale never quite vanished. The only four-legged creature universally canceled from the books in our time was the sea otter. My requests for herd guards to prevent sniping from the Coast Highway, and a patrol boat at the two-mile limit for poachers were acceded to at once. The Albatross was the vigilant launch chosen.

Hopkins Marine staff appeared, looked, apologized. Dr. Heath said:

"Had you reported dinosaurs or ichthyosaurs running down your canyon swimming about, we couldn't have been more utterly dumbfounded."

Whence came Southern sea otters? Not from the Aleuts. The few sea otters still found there belonged to the other existing species. The only known herd of Southern sea otters lay right at my doorstep.

My suggestion that they hid in Rainbow Headlands caverns was only less plausible than "so vast a herd hid in kelp, undiscovered for ages." One tunnel ramified through a hundred of feet and pierces Rainbow Headlands from North to Discovery Cove, Bixby Creek mouth.

The problem remained a staggering mystery. Not since R. Chapman Andrews found dinosaur eggs in Mongolia was there such a contribution to the scientific world, or a reversal of judgment of such proportions. From all over the world writers pilgrimage to this near-Mecca, Rainbow Headlands. Newsreel crews soon followed. This find wasn't in far off Mongolia, but right here in California.

The question often recurred: "How did you discover the sea otters?" I was laughingly accused of rearing them in a trout-hatchery in my canyon, or importing them from Mars and suddenly springing them on a sensation-loving world.

Weeks after the discovery, a killer whale appeared within 80 feet of Bixby Creek mouth. The herd dived; scattered. Some 90 animals took up residence in Kelp Cover directly north of Rainbow Headlands, but too near shore for safety, the state highway lying some 200 feet above. Despite guard-vigilance a score of empty cartridge shells were found at the cliff edge. Four days later my son, William, a teenager, caught some poachers. When I joined him we found a dead sea otter, bullet through its spine, washed up on the beach.

We turned it over to the Fish & Game Commission, but not before being sniped at from bushes and the car in which the poachers fled.

On July 4 so many cannon crackers were hurled from the cliff that the patient little creatures wrinkled up their faces in startled abhorrence of Genus Homo and all his works and faded from sight, some to appear in the kelp a mile north, others to Discovery Cove. Meantime another section teemed with excitement: dozens appeared in the wave-slapped kelp off Torre Canyon, 15 miles south. Gradually their numbers diminished. Few of the herd remained at Torre Canyon. The 1958 census reported 600 sea otters scattered over wide areas.

How can a traveler know the difference between sea otters and land otters? Land otters greatly outnumber sea otters. They live on land, hunt in rivers and lakes. Sea otters, about twice their size, live exclusively on and in salt water. Seals have only flippers, sea otters four true legs and are more closely related to dogs or bears than are seals or sea lions.

Sea otter gestation period is nine months, not the three of land otter, seal, sea lion. Multiple birth is rare.

Unlike walrus and other ocean-going animals, sea otters have no set breeding seasons. Offspring arrive at about two-year intervals, the cute, furry ball born in kelp bobbing on the ocean swells. Held on its mother's belly for weeks, it is then taught to swim.

I've been asked: "Are sea otters too lazy to react like humans?" Say rather that they have a Stevensonian philosophy (Robert Louis), no quarreling, no dueling, no bullying, no sex jealousies.

Rarely molested in kelp by sharks or killer whales, sea otters live in a Herman Melville Utopia, males all free-lance bachelors; females neither gold diggers nor party girls. They may have a technique of their own, these coy and demure, wholly self-satisfied sea otter queens of destiny.

Mating is neither seasonal nor weekend, just a whim of a moment it seems, always with a different mate. In one group of 80 - there are seldom more in one group - two or three of the largest have grizzled heads. One patriarch is all white, an albino. Another proudly wears a "white lion rampant" on chest and flanks. These seldom budged from Discovery Cove to chase after false kelp beds. Their titles fit them: Emperor; empress; a third whitish one of Discovery Cove falls heir to Archduke, Kronprinz.

Sea otter food is largely abalone, crab, sea urchin - shellfish torn from the ocean bed directly below their "parking places."

After eating comes the siesta, if the day is sunny and warm, and ocean swells not too lusty. The really important activity is the bano (bath); whether a delousing process, or are they pestered by marine fleas? They scrub thoroughly all over. One powerful leg and foot is thrust vigorously up and down the spine like a Fuller brush.

SEA OTTER ABILITY TO USE TOOLS: A hungry sea otter brings an abalone and a flat stone from the bottom, places the stone on its chest and hammers the shell fish against it with incredible speed. This makes the "click" sometimes heard. A small arc being broken from the shell, the meat is readily gouged out and eaten.

The rejected shell is customarily pounced on by a seagull which, at first click, wings its direct way to the scene of the banquet. The optimistic gull perches on neighboring kelp, bobs up and down to wait expectantly. Discovery Cove law: only one gull to an otter.

Among military campaigns noted for wholesale slaughter, one waged by the Russians till 1831 changed North American maps, determined the course of westward empire. To include it in "World's Decisive Battles" is impossible, for the victims weren't human but dumb animals.

Wealthy Russians and Spaniards as well as Chinese would wear no other furs. Higher quotations told the story of diminishing supply. Buccaneers cast greedy eyes at "Russia's private racket" and began to colonize in imitation of Russia's Fort Ross. California's matchless furs became the prize in the desperate scrabble.

A sea otter herd, said to be the last, took refuge in kelp covers of Monterey Peninsula and was annihilated presumably by 1831, according the Capt. J.B.R. Cooper. Belated specimens were reported in 1908, 1916, some miles down the coast from Carmel, near Bixby Creek mouth. But were they seals? [??]

A London scientific article (1938) states: ..."regrettable that no authentic picture of a sea otter herd ever will be taken...Latax Lutris Nereis has been dead as a herd since 1831..."

On the heels of this sage prophecy came my sensational find of March 19, 1938. When such pelts were legal, the latest quotes were \$3,500.

In my books the most astounding mystery is: Where did the sea otter live for 107 years? In Rainbow Headlands caves? No. These caves are filled with water half the time. Sea otters need air. Did they hibernate? This and much else remain staggering mysteries. Will they ever be solved?

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