River Otters of South Florida

ROSF 

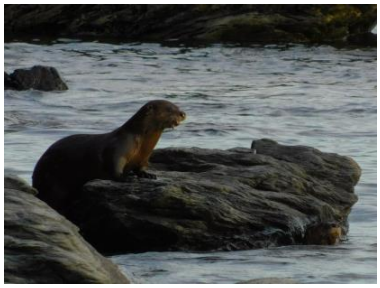
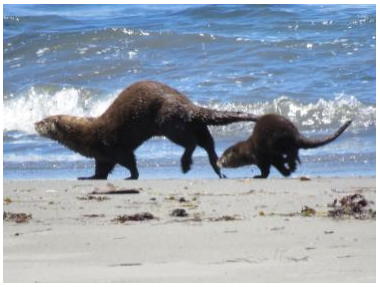
Otter Information

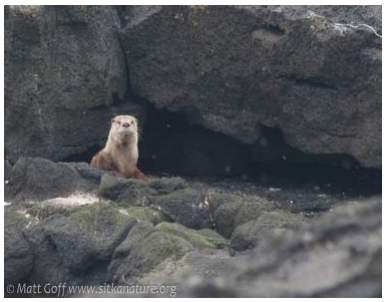
Coastal Marine Otters

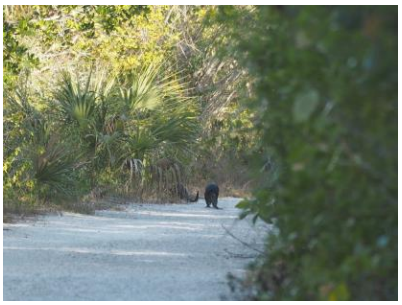
(Lontra canadensis)

of North America

by Victor L. Camp





Coastal Marine Otters (*Lontra canadensis*) of North America

by

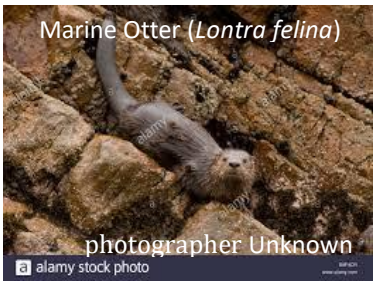
Victor L. Camp

GENERAL INFORMATION: Credits for the photos in this writing are inserted, by this author, on or under the photo. The photographer In several instances, is recognized by his "Handle" (username) only because the photo source does not indicate the person's actual name. An excellent source of coastal marine otter photos can be found at www.inaturalist.com. The majority the photos included in this writing are from this website. There a numerous otter sightings that are not documented with photos and are not included herein. However, photo documentation does exist for coastal marine otter

scats(spraints), skeletal remains, roadway mortalities, and footprints in sand, mud, and snow in the coastal marine environment. Some photos were located during an internet search for “free photos of coastal marine otters”. You found this writing at the website entitled riverottersofsouthflorida.com which is referred to by the acronym ROSF. The ROSF solicits funds from benefactors for the activity and equipment expenses incurred while conducting river otter research and education programing in south Florida. Every benefactor donation is deposited directly into a Florida Gulf Coast University Foundation, Inc. account entitled “river otter”. The Foundation is a 501 C3, nonprofit organization. The Foundation is the fiscal agent for all donations contributed for river otter research and education programing. Additionally, the Foundation does not charge any administrative costs for managing this account. This means 100% of all donations goes directing toward river otter research and education programing in south Florida. This particular writing will be duplicated and locally offered for sale at lectures on river otters, offered by this author, and payment will go directly to the Foundation.

River otters, inhabiting coastal bay marine environments or frequenting these marine environments, are referred to as marine coastal or coastal marine otters. In this writing they will be referred to as coastal marine otters. Photos of otters or traces of otters have been documented within approximately one half to one mile from coastal marine environments. Considering the biology and behavior of the North American river otter, those otters living near coastal marine environments should also be referred to as coastal marine otters. Other than the sea otter, most otter populations in North America inhabit fresh water and are generally referred to as river otters and they, like the coastal marine otter, belong to the same genus and species: *Lontra canadensis*.

The coastal marine otter in North America is not to be confused with the Marine otter (*Lontra felina)* as seen below. This otter inhabits the coastal waters of western South America from the northern coastal waters of Peru southward long the entire coastal length of Chile to the southern tip of Cape Horn in South America. Additionally, coastal marine otters should not be confused with the Sea Otter (*Enhydra lutris*) as seen to the right. The sea otter historically inhabited the coastal waters of western North America from near the southern tip of the Baja Peninsula of California north-ward along the entire length of the western Pacific Ocean of North America to Alaska and westward through the Aleutian Islands and the northern waters of the eastern Pacific including the southeastern coastal waters of the Kamchatca Peninsula and then southward through the Kuri Islands, off northern Japan, to the coastal waters surrounding the Japanese Island of Hokkaido. Currently, a number of gaps of extinction occur in the distribution of the Sea Otter. These include the coastal waters of the Baja Peninsula and southern California and northern California to Washington state, the Queen Charlotte Islands and adjacent coast of British Columbia, the extreme western end of the Aleutian Islands adjacent to the Kamchata Peninsula, and the coastal waters surrounding Hokkaido Island.

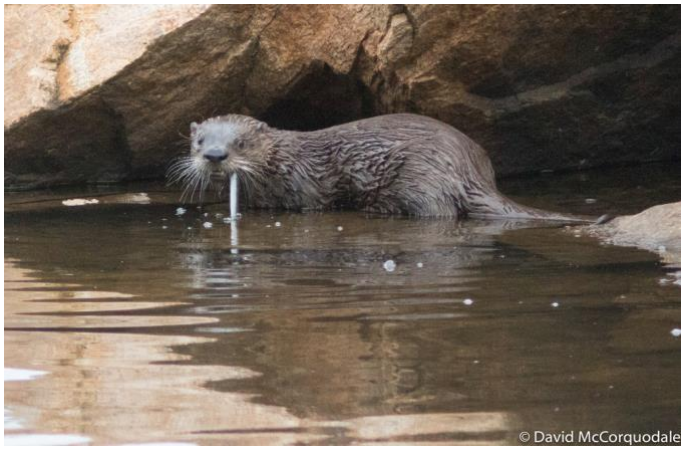


Coastal marine otters are North American river otters that have adapted to living primarily in salt and/or brackish waters. They are invariably found in marine waters protected by barrier islands or may be found on the leeward side of a group of barrier islands or a single island adjacent to a major continental land mass as is the case for Martha’s Vineyard in Massachusetts (Balwin, 2013) and Long

Island in New York (Botinni, 2009) and further north in Maine (Dubuc, Krohn, and Owen Jr. 1990), Newfoundland (Reynolds et 2008), New Brunswick (Cumberland an d DeVink, 2017) and Nova Scotia (Spencer, et al. 2021).

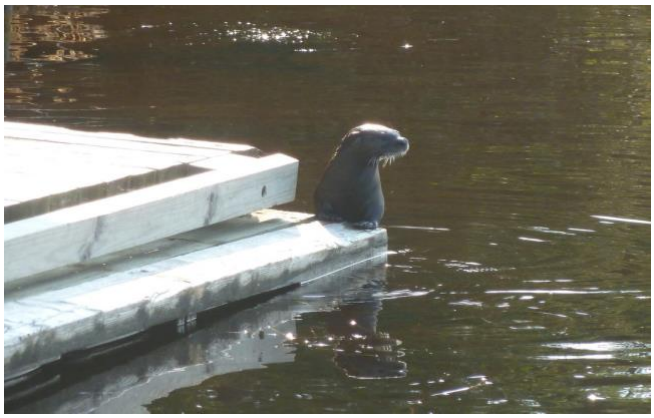
Massachusetts, Martha's Vineyard

(photographer unknown)



Nova Scotia CA, Breton Island
(photo by David McCorquedale)

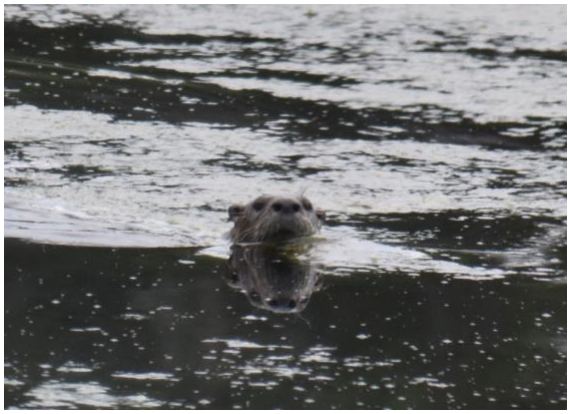
Newfoundland CA, Quidi Vidi Lake
(photo by ideaphore)



New Brunswick CA, North coastal shoreline
(photo by burhard_plache)

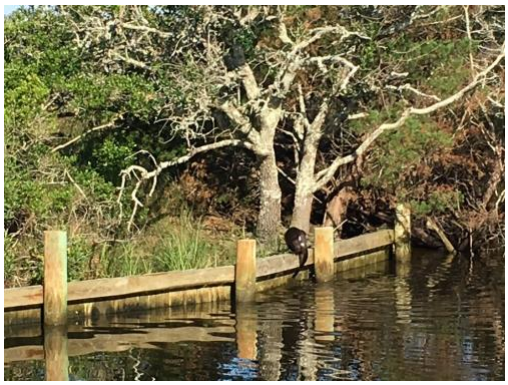
There does not appear to be any publications in the literature on the range of coastal marine otters along the Atlantic coast south of Long Island in New York. Barrier islands exist off the Atlantic coasts of New Jersey, Delaware, extreme southeast Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida. A friend advised this author that he had observed river otters, i.e. coastal marine otters, on the leeward side of Daufuskie Island which is located at the extreme southeastern corner of South Carolina on the north side of the mouth of the Savannah River. Georgia also has extensive barrier islands along the coast which apparently afford suitable habitat for coastal marine otters. In 2001 a seven-year-old

boy was attacked by a river otter while fishing on Tybee Island. The Tybee Island Marine Science Center (TIMSC) states that on the Georgia coast "River otters are found along most of Georgia's waterways…" The TIMSC is located east of the city of Savannah at the most easterly tip of the south shore of the mouth of the Savannah River and is a short distance from Daufuskie Island. This strongly suggests the the Daufuskie Island coastal marine otter sightings would be accurate. Another friend of the author saw a young river otter in the marine waters on the leeward side of Long Key in the Florida Keys. On a later date, the presence of otters on Daufuskie Island and Long Key will be investigated by this author. The Florida Keys sighting contradicts the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission statement that river otters are not found in the Florida Keys. The numerous North American documentations of

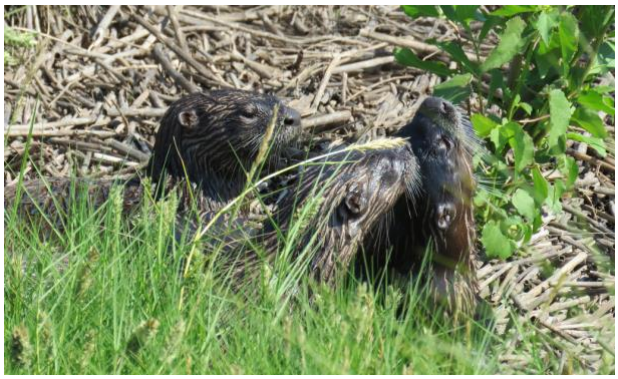


Virginia, Eastern Peninsula off Maryland
(photo by chris_guti2)

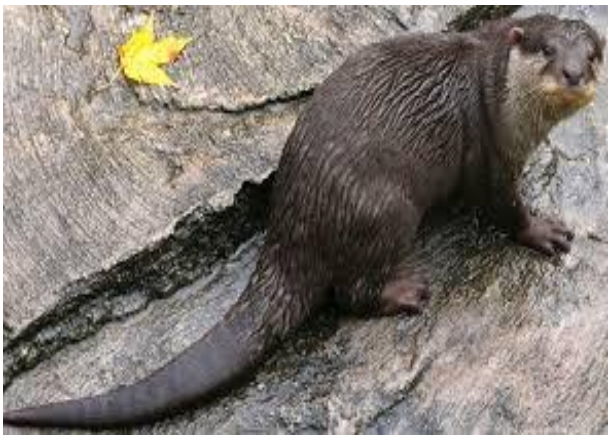
Maryland, Sandy Point State Park
(photo by tienglendar)



North Carolina, Ocracoke Island
(photo by kaciccone)



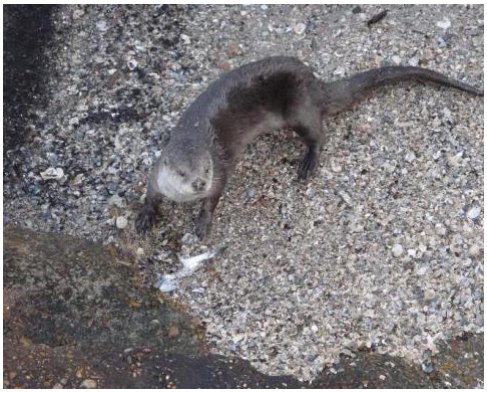
South Carolina, North side of Hilton Head Island
(photo by R. Biggs)



coastal marine otter presence on the leeward sides of land masses, such as single islands or barrier islands, indicates it is likely river otters could be present in the Florida Keys. There is certainly extensive waters and habitat in the leeward sides of the islands of the Keys which could support marine river otter presence in the Keys (personal observation). Along the Atlantic coast of Florida there are numerous series of barrier islands and single islands that afford wildlife protection on their leeward sides. Hearsay states otters are found in

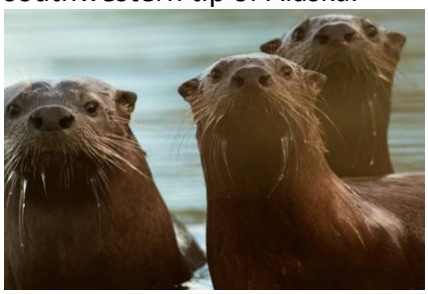
these areas. Investigations also need to occur to confirm the presence of coastal marine otters adjacent to these Florida island types. Along the southern tip of Florida an extensive mangrove habitat exists. These mangrove habitats may or may not be sheltered from direct contact with wave action from the Gulf of Mexico. This protection, IF present, would be provided by low coastal dunes. Along the southern tip of Florida and from the southwestern coast through the panhandle of Florida no scientific investigations have been published documenting the presence of coastal marine otters along these coastal waters. However, it is known, though not published , that coastal marine otters are present in Lee county, Florida. Pine Island Sound is bounded
on the west by the Sanibel-Captiva-Cayo Costa chain of barrier islands, on the east by Pine Island and mainland Florida, on the north by Charlotte Harbor, and on the south by the Caloosahatchee river (personal observation). In northern Florida coastal waters marine river otters "…can be found in coastal salt marshes like those around the FSU Coastal & Marine Lab." This Florida State University facility is in the Florida Panhandle, south of Tallahassee, on the Gulf of Mexico. There is a lack of online photos documenting the presence of coastal marine otters along the Gulf coast shores of Florida from north of the Tampa-Clearwater area to Tallahassee and the beginning of the Florida Panhandle. There are numerous rivers, passes, creeks, and salt marshes connected to the Gulf of Mexico along this section of the Florida gulf coast. Additionally, there are islands and keys and their associated islands formed at the mouths of these rivers. This lack of photo documentation does not preclude the presence of coastal marine otters inhabiting the salt waters and brackish-freshwater interfaces of these environments connecting with the Gulf of Mexico.

In Alabama there have been sightings of coastal marine otters in and around the Savannah, Alabama Port area. There are two major canals that are in the Alabama Port area and otters have been seen in these canals and road kills have also been found. Otters have been spotted in the feeder tributaries of Fowl River East and West as well as Dog River (Dindo, J. 2018). In addition, "The river otter is found throughout Alabama, from the hilly regions of the north to the coastal marshes of extreme south Alabama" (Tharp, R. 2003). In Alabama coastal marine otters have recently been observed in the waters of Mobile Bay. In Mississippi "I see otters in our estuaries all the time." (Sparks, E. 2018). The scientific literature indicates coastal marine otters are prevalent in the salt marshes of the Louisiana coastline. Unfortunately, no photos have been located to document coastal marine otter presence in Louisiana. Coastal marine otters inhabit coastal waters of Texas (see photo to the left). Based upon "available information" reviewed by Jackson, Fertland, and Bergen (1998) the range of coastal marine otters extended only as far south (actually southwest) as the Bolivar Peninsula. These authors listed 22 different "Sighting Records" over the four years prior to their publication. These were opportunistic sightings "…along the coastal waters of Galveston and Matagorda Counties". Since, this 1998 publication numerous other opportunistic otter sightings have been made in the coastal marine waters of Galveston and Matagorda counties. These sightings are posted on the internet. The primary source of some of these sightings has been the members of the Texas Kayak Fisherman organization and can be reviewed at texaskayakfisherman.com. In an internet search this author found 27 different postings of opportunistic sightings in the eastern and western waters of Galveston Bay and Galveston and Matagorda counties. Several photographs of a single coastal marine otter were located in the area of Glaveston Island. This photo can be seen above. From approximately 30 miles west of Galveston Island to the southern tip of Texas coastal marine otters have not been observed. This coastal area of



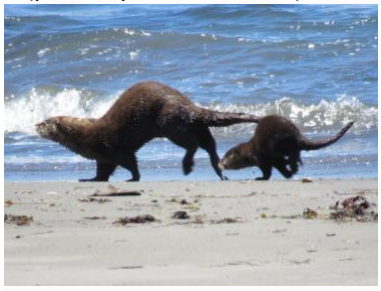
Texas appears to be too dry and lacks fresh and salty to brackish waters necessary to provide food sources for coastal marine otters. There is also lack of adequate vegetation, in this area, that would be needed to provide necessary cover and den sites for use by otters.
The coastal waters of California, Oregon, and Washington do not have the extensive network of barrier islands and large islands close to the mainland as do the states and Canadian provinces along the Atlantic coast. The province of British Columbia and Alaska have extensive coves and small to large islands immediately adjacent to the coastline. Along the coast of California, Oregon, and Washington the coves and islands are formed at the mouths of many rivers flowing into the Pacific Ocean. Many of these river outlets have clusters of several small islands that provide shelter for coastal marine otters inhabiting the leeward side of these islands. In other areas of this coastline there are bays and large coves with peninsulas at their mouths that aid in the shelter of these coves during storms. Estuaries in bays may have saltmarsh habitats on the inland side of these bays.

The range of the western coastal marine otter appears to begin in Northern California at the approximate latitude of San Jose and from there extends northwards, uninterrupted, to the southwestern tip of Alaska.

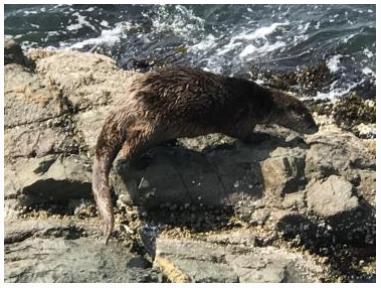


California, Arcata Marsh
(photo by Allen Peterson)

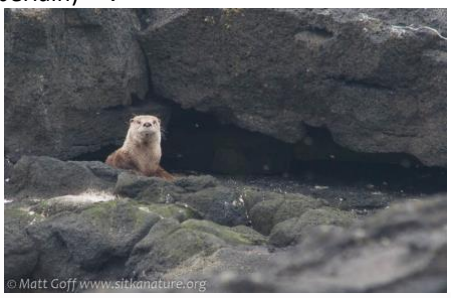
Oregon, Sand Lake
(photo by Ken Chamberlain) .



Washington,Olympia N.P
(photo by larsonek)

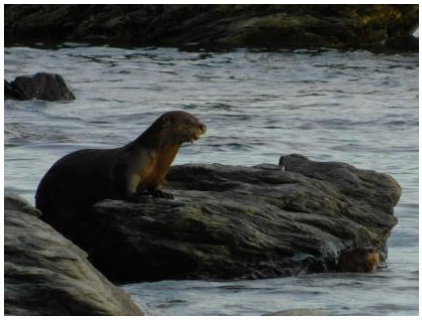


British Columbia, Canada
(photo by booboo)

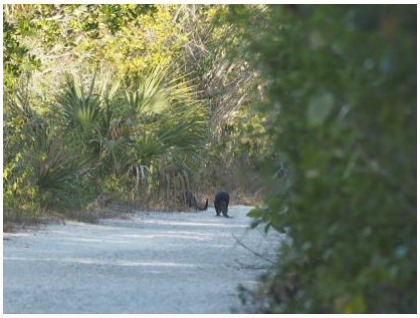


Alaska, Low Island off coast of Kruzof Island
(photo by Matt Goff)

Along the coastal shoreline of Alaska and British Columbia, including Vancouver Island, the geology is distinctly different than the coastline further south along the Pacific coast. The geology of the coasts of Alaska and British Columbia is composed of numerous fjords formed by the advance of continental glaciers. Along much of this section of coastline the ocean directly abuts a rocky and rugged shoreline. In many cases these coastlines have no true shore. Coastal Marine otters are found along this entire coastline.



Newfoundland, Canada, Extreme northeast tip in Salt Water
(photo by Todd Boland)



Florida, Sanibel Island
(photographer unknown)

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ROSF MISSION: The mission of the riverottersofsouthflorida.com website is: “To aid our understanding and interest in the biology, ecology, and the conservation issues impacting the river otter in Florida, in particular south Florida, and to help educate ourselves, our children, and others about otters worldwide”.

June 2025