

# Padding with otters in Kyuquot Sound

By Suzanne Ahearne, For the Calgary Herald August 20, 2010 7:02 PM



## A young kayaker gets face to face with an otter in Kyuquot Sound.

**Photograph by: Suzanne Ahearne, For the Calgary Herald**

“In all the 15 years I’ve been guiding in this area, I’ve never experienced anything like this before,” says Dave Pinel, shaking his head.

All eight of us in our flotilla of mostly newbie kayakers — including my husband and two young sons — sit agog, watching a solitary sea otter rolling and spinning in the glassine, kelp-filled bay off Spring Island, one of the Mission Group of islands on the remote northwest coast of Vancouver Island, and base camp for our four-day trip with West Coast Expeditions.

We're having our introductory paddle, and Pinel — guide and co-owner (with his wife Caroline Fisher, and Bev Hansen from the First Nations village of Houpsitas) — has just given us a primer in sea otter viewing etiquette.

With about 1,400 of the threatened population of sea otters (once hunted to near-extinction) living in Kyuquot Sound and in the nearby waters of Checleset Bay Ecological Reserve, the chance of seeing them on the water is high. At the top of the “responsible viewing” list: Stay at a distance of at least 100 metres.

The young sea otter floats on his back, licking and rubbing the fur on his belly and scrubbing his face and ears with his forepaws. Meanwhile, he's drifting to within a few boat-lengths of us.

“This guy's breaking all the rules,” Dave says laughing. Once he's sure our proximity isn't stressing-out the otter, he switches back into naturalist mode: “This guy's a teenager, about 40 or 50 pounds. He'll spend about a third of his day eating, a third sleeping and a third grooming. Sound familiar Liam?”

My son, on the cusp of 13, makes crooked smirk and lowers his camera to shoot an eye-level video of the otter he's dubbed “Otis” (after the bluesman famous for chilling and watching the tide roll away, he tells me later).

Nine-year-old Dylan is up front in my tandem. He's quiet, except for the excited squeaky noises he makes when Otis surprises him with his spy-hopping, popping up in the water to get a better look at what's going on above the surface.

One of the reasons we came to Kyuquot Sound for a family kayaking adventure was because of the otters. Paddling with orca whales in places like Johnstone Strait offers an opportunity for awe and wonder of the highest order. But W.C.E.'s “Sea Kayak with Sea Otters” slogan struck us as a more enticing introduction to adventure kayaking with kids, than paddling in close proximity with mammals of a more predatory nature like killer whales, bears and wolves.

Kyuquot Sound is growing in popularity as a Vancouver Island kayaking destination. The highly accessible and sheltered Broken Group (between Ucluelet and Bamfield) is so busy in peak season, people are seeking places further north to avoid the crowds.

Just south of the wild and unpredictable waters around the Brooks Peninsula, paddling in Kyuquot Sound offers sheltered waters, endless islets to explore, with the opportunity to venture into exposed waters on the outside. Humpback whale sightings are an occasional treat. Eagles, puffins and seals are staples. And the “swimming teddy bears” that raft-up in groups of up to 100 to snooze and groom close to shore, are icing on the cake.

Spring Island's remoteness does add the additional challenge — and expense — of getting there. Most people drive to Fair Harbour on the Tahsis Inlet (a four-hour drive from Campbell River, half on a gravel logging road) and take a 45-minute water taxi.

We flew from Gold River (a two-hour drive from Campbell River), a spectacular 45-minute flight along the outer coast. We taxied right up to the beach at high tide and the kids leapt from the pontoons right into the sea for their first of many swims. (\$160 per seat. [www.airnootka.com](http://www.airnootka.com))

Another great option — we departed this way — is to catch the M.V. Uchuck III — a working coastal freighter, converted from a Second World War U.S. Navy minesweeper — in Kyuquot (10 minutes by water taxi) for the 10-hour voyage back to Gold River through historic Nootka Sound. ([www.mvuchuck.com](http://www.mvuchuck.com).)

On our first two mornings, I walked from our beachfront canvas tent, to the al fresco outhouse, to the well-appointed kitchen/dining room/library (a driftwood frame covered in clear plastic sheeting), to find heavy fog hanging over the island.

Waiting for the fog to burn off around lunchtime, we spent mornings at low tide exploring the intertidal life on Spring Island, seeing such rarities as the predatory sunflower sea star—“the T-Rex of sea stars” as Pinel calls it—the 24-limbed giant that can move at speeds of up to a metre a minute.

Peering into the fog with binoculars, we caught glimpses of a male otter raft, just off the tip of the island.

We learned two things that most of the 14 million viewers of the YouTube otter sensations from the Vancouver Aquarium don't know.

First: sea otters ‘hold hands’ not out of love, but as a survival mechanism in the open seas.  
Second: males and females don't ‘hold hands’ at all.

They raft separately and their mating rituals are so aggressive, the female sometimes drowns in the process and her nose can get ripped off.

After a two-hour paddle past an abandoned village on Aktis Island and a sheer cliff face they call the Wall of Life, we lunched on Paradise Island. By happy accident, our guides/camp-chefs forgot the cutlery at the base camp and we ate a delicious lunch of guacamole and black bean and corn salad with the sun-bleached clam and scallop shells that covered the beach.

On our last day, we set out early into the fog for a 13-kilometre journey among the islets and sea-stacks that appeared and disappeared in sun and fog for most of the day.

We lunched on a black sand beach, gathered fossils, paddled past a few more fog-shrouded otter rafts and the village in Kyuquot, caught some good two-metre swell, tucked into Barter Cove for a history lesson in exploration and fur trading, before paddling back to basecamp in a wind just scary enough to enliven the senses and make the awaiting campfire and hot dinner all the more welcome.

## If You Go

■ Four-day Spring Island Explorer kayaking package with base camp comforts start at \$1,339 per person. Families sharing tents receive 15 and 20 per cent discount on 3rd and 4th tentmates.

## More about otters

Historically, the sea otter population was about 300,000 and its range stretched in a long arc along the north Pacific from Japan to Mexico.

The Russian and European frenzy for pelts that began on the B.C. coast in the 1700s, brought their population to near-extinction by the beginning of the 1900s.

When the last otter on our coast was shot near Kyuquot in 1929, there were less than 2000 known to exist worldwide. They were given official protection in 1911.

About 40 years ago, 89 otters were re-introduced to the Bunsby Islands (10 kms north of Kyuquot) from populations in Alaska. Thanks to the near-ideal conditions of the Sound—an abundance of kelp and the otter's favourite foods (sea urchins, crab and clams) — their numbers here have continued to grow.

[www.westcoastexpeditions.com](http://www.westcoastexpeditions.com)

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