

Sea Otter Odyssey

Their return to the west coast of Vancouver Island

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, WHILE out on a small boat on the west coast of Vancouver Island, Josie Osborne noticed a big log a few feet away. Upon approaching it, she suddenly realized that the “log” was actually a sleeping sea otter. “We startled each other. I screamed and the otter disappeared instantly,” Osborne remembers. “That’s the closest I came to a sea otter.”

Approach sea otters with care (John Forde, Clayoquot Eco Tours @ The Whale Centre)



Osborne is a Tofino-based marine biologist who now conducts field surveys of sea otters on Vancouver Island. A few years ago, the only place where you could count on a close encounter with a sea otter was at the Vancouver Aquarium. But this is changing.

Sea otters were hunted to extinction in British Columbia during the maritime fur trade of

the 18th and 19th centuries. In an effort to re-establish otters in BC, 89 animals were relocated from Alaska to the waters of Checleset Bay, located north of Kyuquot Sound on the west coast of the Island, between 1969 and 1972. The re-introduction was successful and there are now an estimated 3,200 to 3,500 animals that have repopulated 25 to 33 percent of their historic range along the Island’s west coast. Sea otters have been doing so well that the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) reassessed the population from “threatened” to “special concern” in April 2007.

And now Osborne is busy counting them. In fact, the cute, furry, second-smallest marine mammal has become such a common sight that a number of eco-tour operators have started adding sea otter watching to their menu of wildlife viewing tours.

See otters close up

The greatest sea otter viewing opportunities are on the northern west coast of the island where the otters were first re-introduced. Accessible only by air or water, the areas of Kyuquot Sound, the Mission Group Islands, and the Bunsby Islands in Checleset Bay are in the heart of sea otter territory, offering the most reliable sightings with the greatest numbers of sea otters year-round.

Sea otters spend most of their day resting on the water in groups called rafts that usually

form around kelp beds. Males and females raft separately, and use the rafts to sleep and groom. One well-known sea otter raft is Chief Rock, located about 2 km from the Village of Kyuquot. Visitors are likely to see an average of 30 to 70 sea otters there at any given time. In the village of Kyuquot, you can also stand on the dock and spot a few otters feeding on sea urchins in shallow waters. You will most likely hear them crack clams open or rip the flesh of a crab. Sea otters consume up to 33 percent of their body weight per day, and mostly feed on urchins, crabs, abalone and clams. “It is amazing how fast they eat! In five minutes, they will have devoured three Dungeness crabs,” says Osborne.

Boat tours are the best way to view the rafts, as the otters often perceive kayaks as a threat. “Kayaks are quieter in approach and it might trigger a predator response from the otters,” says David Pinel, co-owner of the kayak company West Coast Expeditions. “Otter hunts happened in canoes and kayaks, and there may be a genetic imprint that the otters don’t like those boats.” As a general rule, whether approaching rafts with a kayak or a powerboat, it is best to stay at a minimum distance of at least 100 metres in order not to disturb the animals. To get to Chief Rock with a boat tour, contact **Leo Jack** who was born and raised in the community of Kyuquot (www.voyagerwatertaxi.com, 250.332.5301). For a kayak trip, **West Coast Expeditions** (www.westcoastexpeditions.com)

The magnificent Mission Group of islands where sea otter sightings are common (David Pinel, West Coast Expeditions)





Left: Lounging sea otters around Kyuquot Sound (David Pinel, West Coast Expeditions); Below right: A view of Nuchatlitz Surge in Nootka Sound where sea otters are in abundance (Liam McNeil, www.malaspina.com/kayak)
Below: Kayakers approach a sea otter raft (Liam McNeil, www.malaspina.com/kayak)

westcoastexpeditions.com, 250.338.2511) will take you on multi-day tours from its base camp on Spring Island, located in the Mission Group at the mouth of Kyuquot Sound.

Getting there: from Campbell River, drive about four hours north on Hwy 19 and then onto a gravel logging road to Fair Harbour, which is located about half an hour by boat from the Village of Kyuquot. From Fair Harbour, you can join a boat tour or a kayak expedition that will take you to sea otter rafts. Alternatively, charter floatplane flights can be arranged directly to Kyuquot.

The Nuchatlitz islands off the coast of Nootka Island near Nootka Sound is another sea otter hot spot. Zeballos Expeditions (www.zeballoskayaks.com, 250.761.4044, TF: 1.866.222.2235) will take you on sea otter watching boat tours in Nootka Sound. Expeditions depart from Zeballos.

Getting there: Drive North on Hwy 19 past Campbell River, Sayward Junction and Woss Junction. Take the logging road to Zeballos.

In recent years, sea otters have also started to occupy the southern range of Vancouver Island, and it is now possible to view individual otters or rafts on a regular basis in Clayoquot Sound, out of Tofino. While there are no boat tours



focusing on sea otter viewing, wildlife operators often include sea otters as part of their regular whale watch tours. Contact the **Whale Centre** (www.tofinowhalecentre.com, 250.725.2132, TF: 1.888.474.2288) to join a whale watch boat tour between March and October, with the opportunity to view sea otters as well as grey whales, sea lions, harbour seals, and a variety of seabirds. For information on kayak trips, contact **Liam McNeil** (www.malaspina.com/kayak, 250.726.7946) who leads kayak expeditions all

over Vancouver Island and is very familiar with sea otter territory. Some of the places where otters have been seen include Cow Bay on the west side of Flores Island, Ahous Bay on Vargas Island, Blunden and Bartlett Islands, as well as Barkley Sound.

Sea otters are definitely back on the west coast of Vancouver Island, and visitors should be ready for a surprise encounter. What might appear as floating bow kelp on the water could be a raft of lounging sea otters. —Isabelle Groc

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