



Rare sea otter confirmed at Depoe Bay

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Morris Grover/Oregon State Parks rangerA rare sea otter floats in the water below the U.S. 101 bridge in Depoe Bay.

Oregon has a rare visitor -- a sea otter that can be easily seen from the seawall at Depoe Bay.

A federally protected endangered species, sea otters went extinct off the Oregon coast in 1906 when the last one was confirmed killed. A reintroduction attempt failed in the early 1970s.

Since then, solo sea otters have been confirmed at Yaquina Head in the 1990s and at Cape Arago in February 2003.

The latest sea otter was photographed Wednesday in the Depoe Bay Harbor, looking down from the U.S. 101 bridge, by Morris Grover, manager of the Oregon State Park's Whale Watching Center at Depoe Bay.

On Thursday, Grover and others watched the sea otter eating and sleeping while drifting north, 20 to 30 yards offshore from the Whale Watching Center. The center is on the ocean side of Depoe Bay at the north end of the U.S. 101 bridge, which crosses the harbor.

A photograph of the sea otter was confirmed by two marine mammal experts, Jim Rice of the Hatfield Marine Science Center in Newport and James Estes of the University of California at Santa Cruz.

While elated by the sighting, Rice cautioned people to not read too much into it.

"It may be a fluke, a single animal wandering into Oregon waters," Rice said. "Without other otters, it will be impossible to reproduce and repopulate, so it wouldn't amount to much.

"On the other hand, one animal means there could well be more out there. If one is able to survive, it could mean we have the right ecological habitat for

others to follow."

Sea otters are popular exhibits at the Oregon Zoo in Portland and the Oregon Coast Aquarium in Newport.

Sea otters formerly ranged throughout the north Pacific, but were wiped out in many of their habitats by hunting. They were protected by federal law in 1913, when the population was estimated to be as low as 2,000.

A reintroduction attempt, from Alaska's Aleutian islands, brought 31 sea otters in 1970 and another 64 in 1971 to the southern Oregon coast near Port Orford. The population either did not survive, or individuals migrated north to colder water.

The closest otter populations to Oregon are southern sea otters in central California and northern sea otters off the Olympic coast in Washington. The Washington population is the result of a successful transplant program. California otters are from a population that survived the otter hunting years.

During February, ocean currents off Oregon are from the south, so this sea otter is likely to be from the California colony, which normally ranges no farther north than San Francisco Bay.

Sea otters can weigh up to 100 pounds, making them the largest member of the weasel family, but the smallest marine mammal.

They are considered to be a keystone species, meaning their presence profoundly affects the ecosystem. A major part of a sea otter's diet is sea urchins. Without sea otters to eat sea urchins, the sea urchin population can explode and adversely affect the underwater kelp forests, resulting in "sea urchin barrens."

Rice said the best way for people to view the sea otter is from the seawall in Depoe Bay, provided the sea otter stays around.

"We certainly don't want a flood of people out looking for the animal from boats on the water," he said. "We don't want to scare this animal away."

Federal laws prohibits harassment of an endangered species and calls for a \$25,000 fine.

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