

## Sea otter sighting confirmed in Oregon for first time in 103 years

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DEPOE BAY Not wanting to look like a fool, Morris Grover kept the otter to himself for the first few hours.

The whiskered, web-footed critter looked like a sea otter, to be sure, but there have been no confirmed sightings of the marine mammals in Oregon since 1906. There have, however, been plenty of false positives.

"A lot of people accuse river otters of being sea otters," said Grover, coordinator of the Whale Watching Spoken Here program based in Depoe Bay. "I didn't dare tell anybody what I thought."

But sea otters are bigger than river otters, and Grover has seen plenty of those. Both have webbed flippers, but sea otters' flippers are significantly larger. And only sea otters spend prolonged periods of time in saltwater. The eagle-eyed volunteer in Depoe Bay who first spotted the animal saw it "with a crab on its chest, having breakfast inside Depoe Harbor," Grover said. But he had to know for sure.

So he shipped pictures of the otter to Jim Rice, coordinator of the Oregon Marine Mammal Stranding Network, and to Jim Estes, the leading expert on sea otters on the West Coast. Both replied with zero doubt: *Enhydra lutris*.

"We're ecstatic," Grover said. "These are supposed to be extinct here."

Depending on whether Depoe Bay's new resident brought relatives, the discovery could have big implications for Oregon, which lost its population of sea otters more than a century ago, five years before the Fur Seal Treaty of 1911 ended the harvest of sea otters in Russia, Japan, Britain and the United States.

By the time that treaty and a 1913 law were passed, the species was eradicated in Oregon and Washington and barely hanging on in California and Alaska.

In 1970, researchers attempted to re-establish the species in Oregon, transporting 31 sea otters from Alaska and depositing them near Port Orford. Sixty-four more were brought in the following year. They all disappeared.

Depoe Bay's otter is certainly not from Oregon, Rice said, but a transient from California or Washington, which is still noteworthy given the distance it would have had to swim to make it this far down or up the coast, he said.

"This is not somebody who snuck over the border for a free lunch," said Grover, who believes that the otter is male but isn't sure. "If he came from California, that's half a state (away)."

What would be even more significant, Rice added, is if the otter sticks around and multiplies.

"How long has it been here, and how many other are there?" Rice said.

"Hopefully the otter will discover there's a good food supply and will be able to make a go of it here."

Sea otters are a "keystone species," which means they have a big effect on their environment, even in small numbers. That's because they munch on sea urchins, which in turn gobble up large amounts of kelp. Because there's nothing significant preying on urchins at the moment, kelp forests are suffering in Oregon.

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"Urchins have taken over the seafloor," Grover said. "This could be a mecca for this guy and anybody he wants to bring with him. It would bring balance back to our ecosystem."

Because Thursday was the third day in a row the otter was sighted, it's possible he'll be around today and in the near future. But Grover warns visitors to search for it only from shore. Disturbing federally protected marine mammals is a felony, punishable by a \$25,000 fine.

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