



SOUTHERN OR CALIFORNIA SEA OTTER

(Enhydra lutris nereis)

Sea otters are members of the weasel family. They are more closely related to land carnivores than either pinnipeds or cetaceans and they are the most recently evolved marine mammal. They have completely adapted to marine life - they rest, mate, give birth, and suckle their young at sea, although they may at times come on land. Their hind limbs are webbed for swimming, but their front paws are padded and have clawed digits, more reminiscent of land animals. The southern sea otter is frequently seen at Piedras Blancas.

Related to: Skunks, weasels and river otters; order Carnivora, family Mustelidae.

Description: Long, dark brown body; flattened head and tail; thick fur; face and head whiten with age; stubby, rounded front paws with partly retractable claws; large, webbed hind flippers.

Habitat/Range: The Southern sea otter frequents rocky coastal shores near kelp beds from Half Moon Bay to Goleta.

Weight: Male – 55 to 90 pounds, average 64 pounds. Female – 40 to 50 pounds, average 44 pounds.

Wild diet: Benthic mollusks, echinoderms—including sea stars and sea urchins, crustaceans, and other invertebrates.

Role in ecosystem: A major invertebrate predator. Considered a keystone species, in part because their consumption of herbivores such as sea urchins, helps to preserve the kelp forests.

Reproduction: Mating may occur at any season and takes place in water. Gestation period lasts approximately 4 to 6 months and births occur in all months, although most young are born from January through March. Usually sea otters give birth to 1 pup.

Longevity: Males – 10-15 years. Females – 15-20 years.

Human uses: Killed for fur; hunted to near-extinction until protected in 1911. Otters are the victims of gunshot wounds and gill nets. Southern sea otters are considered a threatened species.



- The sea otter is the smallest marine mammal in the northern hemisphere.
- They number about 3,000 off the California coast; over 100,000 off Alaska.
- Their coat averages about 750,000 hairs per square inch; a human has only about 100,000 hairs on his/her entire head.
- Sea otters can dive to 300 feet and stay down for 4 to 5 minutes, although most dives are shorter and shallower.
- The sea otter is a tool user. It uses a stone on its chest as an anvil to break shells.
- They have very little body fat and may be attacked and rejected by sharks looking for fatter prey.
- A sea otter's body temperature is about 100 Fahrenheit.
- They maintain body heat with dense fur and a high metabolism and must groom frequently to keep their fur water-proof; they need to eat about 25% of their body weight each day.

