

The Otter News

Spring, 2018

[Donate](#)

Contents

Fun in the Field	Page 1
Abbott's Lagoon	Page 3
What's in that Scat?	Page 5

Fun in the Field, Immersive Conservation and Field Course

Our Staff, Board and college intern Brenden Collet-Grether teamed up in March to offer 8 lucky Marin Academy students a whirlwind week of immersion into the life of a busy research and education conservation organization. ROEP Science Lead and Marin Academy teacher Stori Oates, math teacher Natalie Naranjo, along with ROEP staff and Board, Megan Isadore, Terence Carroll and Robert Aston, organized and led the group through daily presentations, field surveys, sample collection and analysis, camera trapping practice and scientific documentation.



Paddling up Walker Creek in search of otter sign. Students collected scat for our prey study, then analyzed them in the lab.

The students kayaked up Walker Creek with Pt. Reyes Outdoors, learned how to recognize otter track and sign, collected otter scat and later sifted through the cleaned scat in the lab, collecting hard remains like crayfish shells, otoliths (fish ear bones), scales, arthropods including a weevil, feathers and other hard bits. This is part of an ongoing prey species study ROEP is conducting in Drakes and Tomales Bays.

They spent time at several study sites where they learned the basics of camera trapping in various habitats and conditions. By far the biggest highlight of the week was seeing otters at several of our sites. We watched them for a good hour at Abbott's Lagoon, hunting in the rich waters and napping on the beach. At Drake's beach we saw an otter come from in from the surf carrying a scoter in its mouth trot directly toward where we crouched behind some shrubs and swim into a culvert. Wow!



Otter with gull. Photo by Carlos Porrata

Along with otter track and sign, camera trapping, and field observation, the students came away with a better understanding of what conservation biology is and how field biology and research can support conservation decisions. The students enjoyed the week and were surprised at how much work goes into choosing and setting up camera sites, as well as how much fun it is to sift through debris and find treasure, like an otolith that tells us what species of fish the otter ate. This kind of field class is an eye-opener to students, who learn how real-world science works and helps them to feel a sense of place while contributing to ROEP's ongoing research. We are planning next year's classes now, with the intention of expansion to serve public schools.

[Donate](#)

Abbott's Lagoon: Protecting Wildlife

Did you know
Abbott's Lagoon is a
precious resource
for Point Reyes
National Seashore
river otters?



Approximately 20% of the otters in the Seashore live around the Lagoon, and the females raise many a fat pup hunting in the rich waters. Last year people discovered the joys of fishing large-mouthed bass at Abbott's, and we noted many clustering around the far end of the inner lagoon, near the walking bridge that separates inner and outer lagoons. Several times we saw mother otters with their young pups attempting to get through the area but hanging back while people were there. Unfortunately for the otters, there is no alternative way for them to get between their hunting areas in the outer lagoon and the inner lagoon where they rest and nest aside from swimming through the gap or loping over the raised berm. After observing over the summer, fall and winter and writing up a brief on the situation, we went to the Point Reyes National Seashore staff for help.

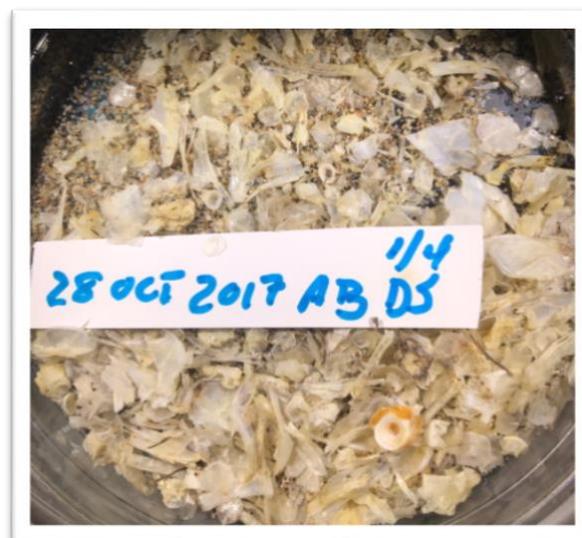


PRNS staff including Science Coordinator and Marine Ecologist Ben Becker; Wildlife Ecologist Dave Press; and Chief of Interpretation John Dell’Osso worked with us to make friendly signage asking people not to linger on the banks around the inlet during pup season. Thankfully, there are many areas for fishing and recreating around the lagoon, so we hope this protection for precious wildlife will be welcomed. One of the main goals of our research is to uncover possible problems and mitigate them before they cause harm to wildlife, especially a recovering species like river otters. Many thanks to the Point Reyes National Seashore staff for their professionalism, care and concern!

[Donate](#)

What's in that Scat? The fascinating inner lives of otters

Our analysis of otter scat to discover their seasonal prey items continues. Thus far we've discovered crayfish (lots of crayfish!), fish scales, bones and otoliths (inner ear bones), insect wings from dragonflies and lady beetles, weevil parts, gastroliths (calcium deposits from crayfish), various feathers, fish and insect eyes, a bird's foot, gills and various organs from fish and birds.



Clockwise, plainfin midshipman otoliths, feathers, mixed fish bones.

The most surprising discovery has been an enormous mass of lady beetle wings. Apparently, an otter came upon a bush where the beetles were massing and snapped them up. Otters are extremely opportunistic eaters and would never pass up a chance for easy protein!

This effort includes high school students as part of our Hands-On High School program, ROEP staff, Board and volunteers and our college interns, Brenden Collet-Grether and Emma Sharpe. We work at the science lab at Marin Academy, cleaning, sorting and identifying prey remains. Those we're unable to ID will be sent to Pacific Identifications, whose specialty is the identification of whole or fragmentary skeletal elements from marine and freshwater fish, land and sea mammals, and birds from western North America.



This study, partially funded by the Sacramento Zoo Conservation Fund and the Point Reyes National Seashore Association, will give us baseline information on river otter diet over several years, by season. The information will help us understand the role river otters play in our local ecosystems, pave the way for future, more in-depth understanding of local food webs, help ecologists make management decisions in relation to endangered species, and as time goes on, offer insight into the alterations in diversity and abundance of species wrought by climate change

Board members Mary Ellen King and Robert Aston work on otolith identification.

[Donate](#)