

Encounters with the Wild Penobscot

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Penobscot River Restoration Trust. ©2006

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Otters on the River (Part 1): A Surprise Encounter

A mid-November walk along the Penobscot River in Old Town brought me a surprise encounter with an animal that had until then proven elusive to me. I was taking a mid-day break to walk my dog, Willow, on a well-used path by the boat landing across from Indian Island. Willow, like most labs, likes to lead the way, winding on and off the path and taking occasional forays into the water when caught by an intriguing scent. I typically follow almost blindly, usually lost in some thought or another, indirectly soaking in the sounds of the river flow and feel of the rough path beneath my feet. I was startled by the sound of several splashes a few yards to my right; with a short warning to Willow to "stay," I quickened my pace to see what Willow had scared up. At first glance, I thought it was a pair of beavers that were peering over at me from the water. With a snort, one head slipped beneath the surface and a sleek body curled back up out of the water, the other head followed in similar fashion, and then I saw two more heads appear behind the first two. I knew immediately these were not beavers, but river otters!

Willow was anxious to join them, whining by the river bank, ready to plunge in. I remembered reading that otters can be ferocious fighters, and I called her back to my side. The otters swam against the force of the river, dipping back under the water and then popping back up with frequent snorts. I tried to take a few photographs with my digital camera between bare branches of trees. They stayed close by, even as Willow pranced impatiently along the shore. I finally gave up on the photo-taking and heeded what I imagined must be their warning to be left alone, calling to Willow to move on. Perhaps we had stumbled across a new foraging spot, and had interrupted a good feed. We continued up the path, turning around at a marshy area below the local airport's helicopter launching pad. A smile remained on my face as I thought about my good fortune.

To my surprise, on the way back our walk was again interrupted - this time by a sharp whistle. I looked out upon the river again, just in time to see a mature bald eagle swing low across the river's surface. I watched the eagle as it flew upriver until it went out of sight, then looked back over the water, to find eight otter eyes peering over at me again. I realized the whistle had come from them. Willow and I walked slowly along the path, with the otters swimming parallel to us. They kept pace with us by repeatedly going under and looping back; then they disappeared, only to climb out of the water onto some debris caught in the high water of the season. One otter seemed to attract the attentions of the other three; they would slink up to her and roll their heads over her neck. A mother and her pups, I thought. A fallen tree proved to be the perfect spot for them to get a closer look at us, and they emerged fully from the water to settle on a thick branch. They were particularly intrigued when Willow moved restlessly up and down the path, and when I called out 'hi' to them in a high-pitched, clipped tone. I found a good opening between the branches of some shrubs still clinging to leaves to capture the family in pose. After a few more minutes, they tired of us, and we went our separate ways.

Since that day, I've read up a bit on otters and spoken to a few people who spend a lot of time on the river for both work and pleasure. The words 'elusive,' 'rarely sighted' but common on the river, 'playful,' and 'very curious,' were oft repeated. I particularly like this description from Paul Rezendes' book, *Tracking and the Art of Seeing: How to Read Animal Tracks and Sign* (page 137):

Otters' efficiency at catching fish leaves them a lot of time to play. They often seem to be carefree and full of fun, sliding down beaver lodges and riverbanks and rolling in the water. They'll pick up a small pebble from the bottom of a pond, bring it to the surface, and drop it, then swim down under it and catch it on their forehead. They'll flip and turn with the pebble still on their forehead as they bring it to the surface, then drop it again and start all over. They're very comical to watch. They're curious as well, like most weasels, and can be very secretive.

Several people told stories about paddling quietly on the river, coming around a bend, and surprising an otter with a fish caught in its mouth or paws. During duck hunting season, Dan Kusniarz, water quality specialist for the Penobscot Indian Nation, has seen river otter batting around his duck decoys.

This column, *Encounters with the Wild Penobscot*, is a place to explore the habits of those creatures and plants that I discover along the shores of the Penobscot and while canoeing or kayaking on the river. On occasion, guest contributors will offer their experiences in my place. Sometimes the focus will rest on the people of the river. Humans are part of the Penobscot River ecosystem: the Penobscot Indian Nation has benefitted from the rich resources for many thousands of years, European settlers worked the river in many ways for both commercial gain and pleasure, and today people continue to enjoy and make a living from what the Penobscot offers. Our actions, in particular those of the past several hundred years, have shaped the present conditions of the river. We have the power to turn back some of those actions that harmed life on the Penobscot. With realization of the Penobscot River Restoration Project, the inland woods and waterways of the Penobscot watershed will be reconnected to the sea. We will once again experience the vision of thousands and thousands of sea-run fish returning to the river and its many tributaries to spawn, and observe what it means to see life restored along this great waterway as eagles, otters, and other wildlife benefit from the revitalized fisheries.

On the pathway where I encountered the four river otters, the Penobscot River is now covered with a thick layer of ice. I can hear the ice groan as it shifts with the current flowing beneath it. I imagine river otter may be slipping by me, unseen, silent, perhaps foraging for fish in open pockets of water nearby. Like the many species of sea-run fish that will be restored to the river, otter are not one of the more visible creatures residing here. Yet their existence is integral to maintaining what remains of the wild Penobscot, and the health and vitality of otter populations is an indicator of the health of the community that we are all part of here. Because of their sensitivity to human disturbance and development, it is important to consider the presence of otter and other wildlife as we consider economic development plans as part of the restoration effort. And, since otter are not well-studied in Maine, it would be timely for the state to conduct a study of otter in the Penobscot River watershed to determine the health of the population, and to determine how otter may benefit from removal of dams and the return of sea-run fish to their natural habitat. In the meantime, I appreciate knowing river otter are out there, and I will wish for future encounters with this curious and playful creature.

Please return to *Encounters with the Wild Penobscot* in February, when we will learn some of the secrets of river otter life!

~ Cheryl Daigle, Penobscot River Restoration Trust

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