

# They eat seals, don't they?

*James Swan: Otter and seal hunting on Willapa Bay*

James Gilcrest Swan, one of Willapa Bay's earliest pioneers, chroniclers, and anthropologists, describes seal and otter hunting in his early recollections and fine memoir called "The Northwest Coast; or Three Years' Residence in Washington Territory."

A treasure trove of information, to say the least, this book is certainly the first and most authentic description of pioneer and Native culture ever written about this time and place we are lucky enough to call home.

Swan lived on the bay from 1851 until 1854. In the coming months, we will investigate more of this major writer. For now, let's explore the lives of our paddle-footed mammal friends.

The other day, my friend Dennis Battles arrived with an empty coffee cup, his fine little camera and with two of man's best friends, in this case, Reggie and Milo.

The camera contained shots of river otters plying Ilwaco's Black Lake for trout and bass. To be precise, momma otter and papa otter and their two darling offspring. Frolic might have been a better word, for these furry creatures appear to be the most playful and curious mammals in all the animal kingdom.

Years ago, I met two of their brethren early one morning trout fishing on Bear River, the tumbling and winding Willapa Hills tributary on the northern end of Willapa Bay.

I arrived early, and could tell from the lack of footprints that I was the first human on the stream after a hard midnight rain. The conditions were perfect and anticipation ran high. I imagined a few fat harvest trout sautéing slowly in a pan. Trout Almandine, to be exact!

Four fishing holes and a mile later, I was stumped. None of this made sense. The conditions were perfect. I knew the water.

On the fifth hole, I was startled by two loud splashes. Rising not 20 feet from me, and just downstream from a well-worn slide, two mature otters greeted me like an old friend, their mouths clicking, and curiosity abounding.

Now, I understood. Otters are far better fishermen than a man with a fishing pole and a can of worms. I was late. Already, they had finished breakfast, my trout!



Photo by Dwight Caswell

A river otter

"Good morning friends," I said, offering a neighborly salutation. It was impossible to be angry. They submerged and rose, now, even closer. These lovely creatures remained amicable, curious, and unwary. The words cuddly and charming come to mind.

Which brings us back to Black Lake and later, to James Gilcrest Swan. Black Lake is essentially landlocked. North and east of the lake, a small slough crosses through fields and cranberry bogs. More ditch than waterway, the otter must have traversed several miles of inconsistent shallow water, only to arrive at the lovely lake. The small stream is called Tarlet Slough, and was once a portage for the Chinook between the Columbia River and Willapa Bay. And herein lays the ancient link.

Swan describes hunting for otters in Willapa Bay, hunting off a prominent rock appendage called Stony Point about 10 miles south of South Bend, the town that claims itself to be the oyster capital of the world. It may well be. Piles of empty shells dominate the sky line. Willapa Bay produces better than 20 percent of the nation's oysters.

Like gourmands who devour succulent oysters from our Shoalwater Bay — the older nom de guerre — otters adore mollusks.

There are two varieties of otter: sea otter, *Enhydra lutris*, and river otter, *Lontra canadensis*. The latter haunt our rivers and fresh water passages.

The sea otter is now extinct off our

coast. Thank God, colonies still exist in Alaska and Northern California.

Forgive the trappers who gathered and sold the dense furs with impunity. And forgive the Chinese who coveted the plew (mountain man jargon for a bale of pelts or furs).

Times were different. And then this: I swear to God that I saw a large sea otter swimming off the North Jetty last winter. A long shot, I suppose. Wouldn't it be wonderful to welcome them back?

Seals were hunted and eaten by the Chinook and Quinault First Peoples, by all of the Northwest coastal tribes.

On Willapa Bay in the 19th century, they were also eaten by some of the whites. Swan certainly did!

At the same time, the otters were soon gone from our waters. Hope dangles and dances. We pray and work for a better world for our children, for theirs; for a legacy that is bright and enduring. Guess what: these cute critters are the comeback kids.

## On the hunt

Toke Point off Tokeland, at the north end of the bay, was named after the chief, Old Toke. His prowess for hunting seals was legendary.

Swan describes how the elder would pass downwind from one of the numerous sand spits that dominate the month of the Willapa, anchor his cedar canoe out of sight, disrobe, and then

swim underwater to the front of the island, all the while keeping all but his head submerged.

Rising from the water like a Navy SEAL (no pun intended), he would corner the prey and spear the mammal with a 20-foot lance attached to a rope of cedar-twined weaving. The wound in the dead seal was plugged by thick grasses or a wooden stopper to seal in the rich scarlet blood.

Preparation: the dead creature was rolled back and forth over two 10-inch diameter logs until the fur on its sleek body was singed off by a low-burning fire. The skin was discarded or used later as a float for fishing, and sometimes as a container to store the seal grease. A mild oil when fresh (says Swan), the seal fat was rendered for cooking. The red meat was boiled in its own blood, or roasted slowly over the open fire. Swan claimed that the liver of a young seal was a particular delicacy. Let's call this the foie gras of the Columbia Pacific.

Otters, apparently, were hunted simply for their luxurious fur. They grow up to 1 million hairs per square inch, the densest fur of all mammals. Robert Gray headed straight for China after swapping trading goods for the thick furs with the Chinook, just off Fort Columbia on the Big River. The River of the West was named in 1792 after his sailing ship, the Columbia Rediviva.

Gray obviously fared better than the Natives. Rumor might suggest that Gray's crew infected the noble tribe with smallpox.

Capt. William Clark verifies that. In 1806, he saw many signs of pox on the Natives who survived the epidemic. He didn't seem overly concerned. Few of the European settlers did. They

coveted all the land, timber and salmon that had belonged to these people for eons. Swan was an exception.

While I write, river otters frolic happily, their keen dark eyes and whiskered cute faces darting and quivering like munchkins on a holiday eating spree. Lying on their backs, they paddle about, nibble on clams, crabs, and snails. They are a dainty bunch.

Their paws are dexterous. They are the only sea mammal to use tools, small rocks in this case, to open mollusks. In doing so, they protect the fragile kelp beds. Kelp in turn, gobble up greenhouse gases.

They thrive close to home, water neighbors. To see is to believe. These playful creatures enrich our lives. We must guarantee theirs.

These playful creatures enrich our lives.

## Coastal Life

Story by DAVID CAMPICHE