



# **WEST MARIN WILD**

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## **Pelican Buffet**

I'll have to admit to a fascination with natural predation, as I enjoy watching a hawk seize a gopher, a seal thrashing a salmon, or even a spider in my kitchen battling a hornet to the death. When I read in Bay Nature Magazine ([www.baynature.org](http://www.baynature.org)) that the cuddly river otters at Rodeo Lagoon have begun eating brown pelicans, I was intrigued.

The brown pelican (*Pelecanus occidentalis*), listed as an endangered species since 1970, weighs in at 6-12 pounds and a wingspan of up to 8 feet. In the other corner, sporting a sleek brown pelt and weighing in at up to 30 pounds, with sharp teeth and claws, is the North American River otter (*Lontra canadensis*). Otters are strong and powerful swimmers, often likened to a torpedo in water. Otters can remain submerged for several minutes and can swim a quarter mile underwater if necessary. Watching a brown pelican taking flight from water, you know they don't stand much of a chance if the otters surprise them.

River otters are well-known for their playful nature and entertaining antics - sliding down river banks, chasing and wrestling each other, body surfing. Their vocal repertoire includes all kinds of adorable whistles, chuckles, chirps, grunts, and snorts. Even their mating is cute: males and females have a play date before they actually mate, and afterwards the pair will romp and wrestle some more.

River otters mostly eat fish, but will also snack on insects, frogs, crustaceans and small mammals. Some larger otters will attack and kill water birds as large as herons. In 2006, otters at Rodeo Lagoon developed a disturbing taste for pelicans. Biologists have theorized that algal blooms in the lagoon could have reduced available fish. Researchers found the remains of at least 30 pelicans last year near otter den sites at the edges of the lagoon.

Maybe an idle lifestyle helped turn mellow Marin otters to the dark side. In retrospect, we should have seen this coming, since otters have some particularly nasty habits and major boredom issues. First off, they sleep more than half their life. They spray musk and urine around their territories in a behavior called "sprainting." Ewww! Otters release an awful smell through their anal glands when threatened. Although they are sociable most of the year, males get mean during mating season and engage in furious battles.

Rodeo Lagoon otters ambush pelicans from below, pulling them underwater or climbing on top of the huge birds and dragging them to a watery demise. Bay Nature called it "otter chaos." I needed to see these "E woks gone wild," get close to the action, inside the head of the otter, like Bill Murray with the Caddyshack gopher. Oh Mr. Otter... I cycled out to the Marin Headlands to witness the frenzy.

In retrospect, my decision to swim across the lagoon in a pelican costume dipped in sardine oil was probably not a good idea. Just kidding – we watched safely from shore as a harmless family of playful otters frisked around the lagoon. Pelicans and other birds took flight as soon otters came near, but alas no predation. When I got home there were reports of another otter attack on a pelican that very day.

Predation is part of the balance - otters gotta eat and usually it's imperiled salmon on the menu. Otters themselves are protected in many states because past fur trapping took a huge toll, and they are still impacted by water and air pollution and human disturbance. Marin's otter population only recently increased from very low numbers. Other places you can now find river otters in West Marin are Olema Marsh, Lagunitas Creek and Muir Woods.

*West Marin Wild* is a sporadic column on the wildlife and natural world of West Marin. Contact me at P.O. Box 111, Bolinas.