

Notes

A River Otter's, *Lontra canadensis*, Capture of a Double-crested Cormorant, *Phalacrocorax auritus*, in British Columbia's Gulf Island Waters

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Direct and apparent predation events by River Otters (*Lontra canadensis*) on birds have been recorded on marine islands and freshwater lakes. We add to this the first known observation of a River Otter capturing a marine bird on the ocean.

Key Words: River Otter, *Lontra canadensis*, diet, birds, foraging, conservation, coastal, islands, British Columbia.

The River Otter (*Lontra canadensis*) is a largely piscivorous carnivore inhabiting riparian areas, coastal shorelines, and archipelagos of North America (Cowan and Guiguet 1965). Their diets have been well described along inland river systems and lakes (Sheldon and Toll 1964; Knudsen and Hale 1968; Reid et al. 1994), yet little is known about their ecology in marine communities. Nevertheless, fishes are their primary food in all habitats (Lagler and Ostenson 1942; Stenson et al. 1984; Bowyer et al. 1994). Birds are considered rare and sporadic food items (Toweill 1974; Stenson et al. 1984).

Early reports of bird remains in the stomachs or faeces of River Otters suggested that they scavenged carcasses (Lagler and Ostenson 1942; Sheldon and Toll 1964). Years later, it was postulated that River Otters probably consume wounded or incidentally killed birds hunted by humans (Toweill 1974). In coastal British Columbia, Washington, and Alaska, however, researchers have recently described predation events by River Otters on nesting marine birds (Hayward et al. 1975; Footitt and Butler 1977; Verbeek and Morgan 1978; Quinlan 1983; Speich and Pitman 1984; Duffy 1995). We herein describe a River Otter's successful aquatic capture of a Double-crested Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax auritus*) in marine waters.

At approximately 1130 hours on 18 February 2005, a family of four River Otters [one adult – three juveniles] swam in an unnamed cove adjacent to Swartz Bay, Vancouver Island (48°42'N, 123°25'W). The sky was overcast, and the sea and winds were calm. At this time, we also observed a mixed raft of approximately 120 Double-crested and Pelagic (*P. pelagicus*) cormorants and Pacific Loons (*Gavia pacifica*) situated

400 meters from the River Otters to the north. The birds drifted east with the current, roughly 100 meters south of Piers Island. They consistently dived and surfaced, presumably feeding on small fishes [Pacific Sandlance (*Ammodytes hexapterus*) or Pacific Herring (*Clupea pallasii*)].

The four River Otters swam directly towards the raft with their heads above water. When within 50 meters, all Otters dived in succession; apparently the foraging birds failed to detect their approach, as they continued to dive and surface. Less than two minutes later, a lone River Otter began swimming south to the unnamed cove with its head above water, towing a large object in its mouth. It dived, and re-surfaced less than 3 meters from our viewing platform with a gasping Double-crested Cormorant held by its throat. The River Otter then swam beneath a shoreline cabin, directly adjacent to a known den-site, and presumably fed upon its prey. We failed to observe the juvenile River Otters from that point on, and saw no evidence of them joining the adult to consume the cormorant. We also saw no physical evidence [i.e., carcass or feathers] after the event.

Observations of River Otters preying on birds are rare and almost exclusively observed on land or freshwater. For example, River Otters have ambushed nesting Glaucous-winged Gulls (*Larus glaucescens*), Aleutian Terns (*Sterna aleutica*) (Hayward et al. 1975; Footitt and Butler 1977; Verbeek and Morgan 1978; Duffy 1995), and Slavonian Grebes (*Podiceps auritus*) (Perkins et al. 2005), and preyed on incubating Storm-petrels [(*Oceanodroma furcata* and *O. leucorhoa*)] by digging them out of nesting burrows (Quinlan 1983). River Otters have also been observed preying on moulting American Widgeon (*Anas americana*) and Green-

winged Teal (*A. crecca*) on a freshwater lake in Alberta (Reid et al. 1994), and a Common Gallinule (*Gallinula chloropus*) on a slurry pond in Florida (Meyerriecks 1963). To our knowledge, this is the first observation of a River Otter preying on a bird on the ocean.

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