

Commentary

A woodpecker's tale points the way for Oregon's sea otter

Nature sometimes delivers wonderful surprises. Such was the case last week when scientists from Cornell University confirmed amateur naturalists' reports and announced that the ivory-billed woodpecker, thought extinct since 1944, had been rediscovered in the Big Woods of eastern Arkansas.

The ivory bill, America's largest woodpecker, has for decades been a kind of feathered holy grail pursued by ornithologists across the shrinking patches of its former forest habitat in the United States and on Cuba. A confirmed sighting by no means rescues this charismatic bird from extinction, but it does give hope that protecting wild land against development may yield more than good feelings. Sometimes, it can yield species whose rediscovery indicates a healthy ecosystem.

Oregon has no ivory bills, but among its missing native species one stands out: the sea otter. Oregon has lacked a self-sustaining population of sea otters since at least 1907, when the last known native sea ot-

ter was killed and its pelt sold in Newport for \$300 — more than \$15,000 in current dollars. For a century, Oregon's near-shore marine environment has lacked others.

IN MY OPINION

Edward C. Wolf



The sea otter is a so-called "keystone" species whose presence and appetite structures its ecosystem. On rocky shores, otters prefer kelp beds and the shellfish they harbor. Indulging a voracious appetite for grazers like sea urchins, otters maintain the productive kelp fronds and, within them, other fin fish, shellfish and invertebrates.

Once Oregon lost its otters, it soon lost kelp beds like those that had fringed stretches of shore between Newport and Siletz Bay. The coast lost a productive base of marine food webs and a living buffer that dissipated wave energy. Predictably, coastal fisheries declined and beaches eroded.

Unlike the ivory-billed woodpecker, the sea otter survives elsewhere in its West Coast range. But Oregon remains the missing link in the sea otter's range.

For the past five years, a group of Oregon scientists, activists and tribal leaders has worked to put sea otters back where they belong, in Oregon's near-shore waters. The Elakha Alliance, named with the native Chinookan word for sea

otters, builds awareness about otters and supports groundbreaking DNA research to document which present-day otter populations most closely resemble the Oregon otters of old. The group is now mapping a path through myriad bureaucratic, legal and biological obstacles toward the possible reintroduction of sea otters.

The goal seemed tantalizingly real during the summer and fall of 2004, when a solitary male sea otter took up temporary residence among the rocky islands of Simpson Reef south of Coos Bay. It may have wandered down from the Washington colonies. Sighted again this spring by an OSU graduate student studying sea lions, the male known as "Nipper" has



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thrilled visitors and scientists.

Like the ivory-billed woodpecker that flew last week into the pages of Science magazine and the hearts of nature lovers around the world, Oregon's prodigal otter suggests that nature possesses hidden resilience that a little human encouragement can draw out.

Bringing sea otters back to Oregon won't be simple, and it won't guarantee the health of the ocean. But restoring sea otters could put us on the right side of a battle to repair the damage of centuries of misguided human activity. The scarlet crest of the ivory-billed woodpecker is a worthy standard to fly above this campaign for life.

Edward C. Wolf is a Portland writer working on a children's book about sea otters. For more about the Elakha Alliance visit www.ecornst.org/inainiprogramselakha.html.