



A DAY AT THE PARK

Story and Photos By Norris (Bob) Dyer

Shollenberger Park Mammals

Most people looking for fish or birds, its presence is obvious -- for all the birds, including the ducks, bail out. It undoubtedly enters the channels from the river via Adobe Creek during high tide. Figure #1 shows its grayish snout protruding from the water as it scans the reeds for anything alive.

Otters have thick, durable fur that has been in demand since Europeans arrived on our shores. Even now, tens of thousands are taken annually for that fur. Humans are, in fact, their primary predator.

Figure #2 shows a more relaxed resident of the channels – the Common Muskrat, *Ondatra Zibethicus*. This rodent can grow to almost two feet and three or four pounds. People sometimes mistake this fellow for the otter but no side channel creature is afraid of this vegetarian. I have even seen an American Coot peck

I'll start with a sensational creature that can stay underwater for up to two minutes, measures four feet long and weighs up to 25 pounds. It is a member of the marten family – *Lutra Canadensis*, the River Otter. It is a rare visitor, that's true, but when it cruises the side channels at the park,

looking for fish or birds, its presence is obvious -- for all the birds, including the ducks, bail out. It undoubtedly enters the channels from the river via Adobe Creek during high tide. Figure #1 shows its grayish snout protruding from the water as it scans the reeds for anything alive.

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Figure #1: River Otter in side channel at the park



Figure #3: Black-tailed Jackrabbit



Figure #2: Common Muskrat in side channel

it on the head for daring to get in its way. It is considerably smaller than the otter with a much more compact body and scaly tail. A few live in the channels and when seen are often dragging long green reeds to their dens. Muskrats seldom search for protein and are not a threat to nesting birds. Their biggest threat is loss of appropriate habitat.

When is a "rabbit" not a "rabbit"? Look at Figure #3. This is a photo of *Lepus Californicus*, commonly called the Black-tailed Jackrabbit. Actually, it is a hare. The main difference? Hare babies, called "leverets", are born with all their fur and with their eyes open. We see the Black-tails romping in Alman Marsh or

in the western meadows of the park. Their big ears are handy for hearing predators but also can be used to regulate body heat by increasing blood flow through them. They can weigh up to 13 pounds but, on a nice run, can still get up to 36 mph. Predators? The adults are too big for hawks but they can be taken by Golden Eagle or Red Fox.

The cute, furry creature sniffing the grass in Figure #4 is a very wary pocket gopher. There are several pocket gopher species in California. The ones we see at the park are Botta's Pocket Gopher, *Thomomys Botta*. Named after naturalist Paolo Emilio Botta who visited California in 1827, it can weigh up to

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eight ounces. As we all know, gophers can be bad news. They make holes and eat our garden plants. In the process of digging around in the soil, however, they also help push minerals toward the surface and aerate the soil, thus making it more fecund. Their tunnel systems can be longer than a football field. The Botta usually does not leave the safety of its burrow, as it constitutes a nice meal for a number of creatures at the park, including hawks, egret, heron, fox or Gopher Snakes. All the upheavals of brown soil by the trail reflect feverish gopher activity for, unlike most of us, they can't take a day off this time of year.



Figure #4: Botta's Pocket Gopher sniffing the grass