

BAY AREA MONITOR



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Spotting the Otters



Transit Fare Policy
Electric Vehicle Batteries
Principles for Ethical Trail Use

Happy Trails to You, Until We Meet Again (in August)

The photo of our furry friend on the front cover of this edition of the *Monitor* was taken by Karen James at Rodeo Lagoon in the Marin Headlands. *Monitor* reporter Robin Meadows joined her there to observe how the River Otter Ecology Project tracks the species that tells us a lot about the quality of our water and the overall health of our ecosystem. You can read the good news about the rebound of river otters in the Bay Area on page 10.

Earlier in this edition, Aleta George keeps us outdoors with a review of trail etiquette, helping you prepare to celebrate the 30th anniversaries of the San Francisco Bay Trail and the Bay Area Ridge Trail. Slip into a sturdy pair of shoes and join her on page 7 (and online at bayareamonitor.org/notes for bonus material about navigating your hike through the region's many cattle herds).

If you feel more at ease behind the wheel, Leslie Stewart offers you a preview on page 5 of what will happen to your electric vehicle's battery once it no longer has the juice to keep you moving. Not that you should be depending on a car for getting around; on page 3, Cecily O'Connor covers the push to keep our public transit system competitive with that ubiquitous private option that clogs our roadways.

And with that, we close the books on our 44th year of publication. In symbolic farewell, League of Women Voters leaders from across the Bay Area wave goodbye from the back cover of this edition in a photo taken at LWVBA's recent council meeting. Or perhaps they're waving hello? Look forward to seeing them soon as we approach a huge 2020 election year — and also look forward to seeing the *Monitor* again in August for the start of publication year 45.

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Original *Monitor* Editor Passes Away

Holly Hollingsworth, the editor of the *Bay Area Monitor* when the publication launched in 1975, passed away on December 12, 2018 in Palo Alto. She was 92 years old.

A past president of the League of Women Voters of the Bay Area, she was passionate about regional transit, air quality, and land use issues. After her tenure editing the *Monitor*, Hollingsworth went on to work at the Metropolitan Transportation Commission as a legislative analyst until her retirement in 1991.



State of Fares: Policy Changes Urged to Improve Transit Quality

By Cecily O'Connor

What if it were possible to travel by bus, train, electric bike, or rideshare using a single account to pay for these transportation costs?

It's one of several fare policy strategies suggested to help prioritize rider and regional needs in *Solving the Bay Area's Fare Policy Problem*, a report published in May by the civic planning organization SPUR. Fare policy sums up the rules that define how much people pay to use public transit, a tab riders increasingly scrutinize with the introduction of new mobility options like Uber.

The root of the transit fare problem is a jumble of fare structures, passes, and prices that are set and managed by more than two dozen individual agencies, according to the report. This arrangement creates rider confusion and compromises quality and equitable access, outcomes that limit public transit's promise to connect people.

For example, there are nine different local bus fares on Clipper, the region's transit fare payment system, ranging from \$1.50 to \$2.50, as well as multiple discount rates for youth and seniors. Overall, Clipper relies on 19,463 fare policy business rules to run the entire system.

But Clipper's makeover — it's in the process of being upgraded to become a more flexible, account-based payment system — offers a chance to reduce complexities and streamline fare policy, said Arielle Fleisher, SPUR's senior transportation policy associate and report author. Clipper was launched in 2010, replacing the previous TransLink system.

Bay Area transit advocates and officials considered fare integration around the time Clipper launched, but the idea never fully developed. Fare integration raises concern because it could spell losses for some operators heavily reliant on fare-box revenue.

For a better sense of the Bay Area's current situation, SPUR's new report outlined five problems resulting from a "disjointed" fare approach. Disparate policies limit transit use, penalize people who take multi-operator trips, and price out low-income riders who can't afford the high up-front

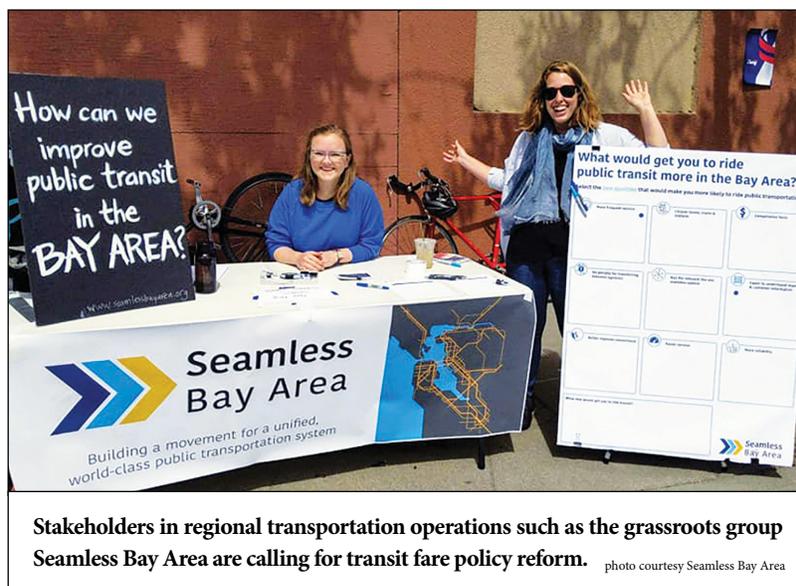
cost of a monthly pass.

Another issue is that a lack of multi-operator fare policies limit state and Bay Area plans for integrated transit stations and services. Lastly, transit riders are shying away from Clipper because they don't understand what it supports and offers, whether it calculates transfers and discounts, if it works across systems, and whether it holds cash in addition to transit passes, according to the report. This hurts Clipper's appeal.

"We have this growing body of evidence to maximize Clipper 2.0," Fleisher said. "It's important that we don't miss the opportunity."

New willingness to entertain fare policy reform is becoming evident. Three separate ideas surrounding an integrated transit fare system were among the finalists in a

public transportation planning competition held last year by the Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC) and the Association of Bay Area Governments (ABAG). The competition called for participants to conceive bold "transformative projects" exceeding \$1 billion, as part of the agencies' Horizon planning initiative exploring opportunities



Stakeholders in regional transportation operations such as the grassroots group Seamless Bay Area are calling for transit fare policy reform. photo courtesy Seamless Bay Area

and challenges the nine-county region may face by 2050.

SPUR was one of the competition finalists who proposed an integrated transit fare system; the other two came from the organization Seamless Bay Area and from a two-person team of college student Eddy Ionescu and local transportation planner Jason Lee. Seamless Bay Area's proposal called for fare, service, and branding integration. SPUR urged a "fare by distance" model where prices vary based on the journey's starting and end point. In their transportation network blueprint *Move Bay Area*, Ionescu and Lee proposed a course of action that preserves an agency's ability to set fares and institutes a regional transfer policy.

Those ideas were added as a single collective project

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State of Fares (from page 3)

to the list of 12 competition finalists slated for further analysis. They joined an inventory of 82 other potential new transportation projects. Depending on how all the projects stack up, they might be included in Plan Bay Area 2050, the region's blueprint for transportation and land-use planning, scheduled for adoption in 2021.

Disparate fares, if not addressed, will continue to dissuade people from using more than one transit service. They also will motivate people to drive, adding to traffic congestion, pollution, and carbon emissions. Cars aren't public transit's only competition either. The rise of Uber and other new mobility services can be, in some cases, more direct and cheaper than using two or three transit services whose fares are not integrated.

"People are more sensitive to the cost of public transit because they have more options," said Ian Griffiths, co-founder and director of Seamless Bay Area. The two-year-old group has been campaigning for a unified regional transit network.

The future of fare policy topped an MTC fare integration seminar in February that was attended by board members, staff from transit agencies, and advocates. The seminar included a presentation about Metrolinx, a transit agency serving the Greater Toronto and Hamilton area, and the steps it's taken to assess fare integration and the effects on revenue and ridership.

One idea born from the seminar was the creation of a steering committee to guide fare integration work if transit agency leaders choose to examine the business case for the concept. This would entail a robust analysis of the costs, benefits, and impacts of fare integration from multiple

perspectives, with the goal of helping agency leaders understand the various tradeoffs involved.

MTC staff expect to give a detailed update on fare integration at the June 17 Clipper executive board meeting, said William Bacon, policy and financial analyst at MTC. If needed, MTC has identified approximately \$600,000 in Regional Measure 2 funds that could support work on the business case.

Jeanne Mariani-Belding, communications and marketing manager for Sonoma-Marine Area Rail Transit (SMART), said, "We are very interested at SMART in being part of that conversation and we'll be following the issue closely."

In the meantime, SPUR's report lays bare the many challenges before regional transit agencies and policymakers. In addition to agreeing on a vision for coordinated fare payment, there also needs to be a clear understanding of costs and benefits. SPUR recommended the business case examine two different scenarios. The first is a revenue-neutral setup to increase ridership overall, which would boost profits for the entire system that could be distributed among operators via revenue sharing.

The second is a revenue-investment scenario where a certain amount is tucked away, either by the region, state, or both, to support integrated fare structure development.

"We're not in a position to absorb a loss in revenue," said BART spokesperson Jim Allison. "We're in a tight budget squeeze for the next couple years."

Well beyond fiscal matters, there is an urgent need for someone or some agency to champion the entire effort. MTC, Clipper's executive board, transit operators and their boards, and the California State Transportation Agency will need to think about shifting practices and roles, and even assuming new responsibilities, according to the SPUR report.

SPUR's report covers a lot of ground, discussing the nuances of strategies and action plans for policymakers, transit operators, and advocates to fit all the fare policy pieces together.

Should all of this move forward, SPUR's vision of a single-payment system would mean riders could seamlessly pay for different expenses — buses, trains, e-scooters, ride shares, bridge tolls, and parking. It also would ensure riders with low-incomes qualify for reduced fares and incentivize customers with promo codes and discounts that can be shared across programs faster.

When a transportation system is "cost-effective, easy to use, and frequent enough to provide a faster journey, that's a potentially transformative impact that really changes the value prop of public transportation," Griffiths said. 

Cecily O'Connor covers transportation for the Monitor.



Depleted, Not Dead: Second Life for Electric Vehicle Batteries

By Leslie Stewart

Already plentiful in electronic devices, batteries also power an increasing array of products formerly operated on fossil fuels. Many of them, from smartphone batteries to those in electric vehicles, are designed to be rechargeable, but they don't last forever. At some point they become too worn out to do the job they were built for.

For small electronics, recycling is the desirable endpoint, although rates are still distressingly low according to many estimates — it's just too tempting to discard them along with other trash. However, it's not going to be easy to handle depleted electric vehicle batteries so casually. They're large and very heavy — “they won't be dumped in the backyard,” joked Dale Miller, president of the Golden Gate Electric Vehicle Association.

Instead, as the first generation of these batteries begins to age out, with larger waves to follow, vehicle manufacturers and regulators are planning ahead for what happens to them when they move on to their “second life.”

Miller observed that car manufacturers are selling to a world market, so mandates in one country require solutions that may eventually be applied world-wide. In the European Union and China, “cradle-to-grave” regulations require manufacturers to take back depleted batteries or provide for disposal, so pilot projects and trials for doing this responsibly and cost-effectively have been underway for some time.

The first option is re-use, because batteries that are too depleted from recharging to adequately power a vehicle may still have quite a bit of oomph left. In Japan, Nissan powers streetlights with re-used batteries. General Motors uses them as backup power for administrative offices at a Michigan data center. At BMW's Mountain View offices, the automaker collaborated with PG&E to develop a solar-powered energy storage system using eight repurposed car batteries.

EVgo, which provides fast-charging stations for electric vehicles, is powering a station in Union City with re-used BMW i3 batteries replenished by solar power. Fast-charging uses a lot of power and can incur surcharges from utilities when done at peak demand times. Using batteries can level



General Motors used old Chevrolet Volt batteries to help supply power to its administrative offices in Milford, Michigan.

photo by John F. Martin

out the draw on grid power, significantly reducing surcharges.

Of course, old batteries can't just be swapped straight into a storage system or charging station. As Harmet Singh, CTO of charging infrastructure company Greenlots, explained at the Storage Week 2018 industry conference, “Electric vehicle battery packs have modules, and modules have cells, and not every module and not every cell degrades

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Depleted, Not Dead (from page 5)

uniformly. There is an effort required to repurpose the right modules and the right cells into the second-life battery pack. There are costs associated with that.”

Although second-life battery systems scored high on both cost-effectiveness and ease of adoption in a 2018 Bay Area Air Quality Management District report on technology to reduce greenhouse gases, the report cautioned that “the technology and vendors are still very young and higher production levels are needed to lower costs and achieve economies of scale.” Currently, companies who are developing re-use and recycling programs work with defective or damaged batteries, or new batteries used in durability tests or demonstration vehicles. By 2025, research organization Bloomberg New Energy Finance estimates that 27 percent of used vehicle batteries will have some useful second-life applications.

Eventually, batteries will become unusable at the end of their second life, but will still have some residual value. Some source materials for the batteries, such as cobalt, are expensive and obtained from parts of the world where mining may be exploitative of both workers and the environment. Reducing the use of new materials by recycling batteries can bring down financial costs and decrease the need for harmful sourcing practices. However, with increased production and new technologies, electric vehicle batteries are becoming steadily cheaper, which may make materials recovery less cost-effective than making new batteries from scratch. Recycling then becomes driven by other factors, such as cradle-to-grave regulations.

Most electric vehicle batteries are lithium-ion (Li-ion),

chemically similar to those used in small electronics and household devices. The usual recycling method for small batteries has been to crush and smelt them to extract the most valuable materials, but many companies are exploring alternative techniques for recycling the much larger batteries in electric vehicles. For example, battery recycling company Retrieval Technologies manually disassembles them and then uses a chemical process to extract metals.

An Argonne National Laboratory factsheet on battery recycling points out that the components of Li-ion batteries can vary by manufacturer, requiring multiple approaches to recycling. CalEPA has just seated an advisory panel, the Lithium-Ion Car Battery Recycling Group, as required by 2018’s Assembly Bill 2832 (Dahle). Its report on options for recycling in California is due by April 2022.

The Golden Gate Electric Vehicle Association’s Miller observed that the plans for older batteries may be premature, and possibly even unnecessary, given 1) the percentage of vehicles that are electric, 2) the predicted more than eight-year life span of the batteries, and 3) the possibility that with accelerated research into battery technology, Li-ion batteries may be superseded by something new.

“It’s an anticipated need, not a current one. We’re about ten years into the third set of electric vehicles,” he explained. “We have [association] members still driving cars with Ni-Cad batteries. The current set — Tesla batteries, in particular — are lasting a lot longer than predicted.”

Miller expects that used electric vehicles, often purchased as commute vehicles with low daily mileage, will work for many years. In California, electric vehicle manufacturers are required to warranty batteries for 10 years or 150,000 miles. Nevertheless, there will be large numbers of batteries that must be dealt with in the future. The International Energy Agency predicts the number of electric vehicles around the world could grow from about 2 million in 2019 to as many as 140 million by 2030, and California is on the leading edge in the United States.

Given the many times in the past when an innovation was supposed to solve one problem but created others (the MTBA gas additive comes to mind), it’s encouraging to know that electric vehicle batteries are being planned for throughout their life cycle. Miller commented, “Most of the [electric vehicle] drivers I know are not really worried about this; although they are concerned about the environment, they are comfortable that this will be taken care of in a responsible way.” 

Leslie Stewart covers air quality and energy for the Monitor.



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Rules of the Trail

By Aleta George

With summer beckoning and some wildflowers still in bloom, it's time to get out on the trails. Fresh on the heels of National Trails Day on June 1, people have extra momentum to keep hiking during the 30th anniversaries of both the San Francisco Bay Trail and the Bay Area Ridge Trail.

Those two massive projects represent just a fraction of our embarrassment of riches when it comes to trails — and we use what we have, too. It's hard to know how many of the nearly eight million residents in our region use all our trails, but it's safe to say that a high percentage of people keep them busy; add tourists, and they can get downright congested.

Most trails in the Bay Area are considered multi-use, which means they accommodate hikers, dog walkers, cyclists, people with limited abilities, and equestrians. Within these user groups, everyone travels at a different pace, and on trails managed by different agencies with unique user policies. Yet despite this variability, it's a good idea for all of us to follow shared rules of the trail for safety and the protection of the environment. Although there are no universal rules of the trail, we can get close by following the Seven Principles developed by the Leave No Trace Center for Outdoor Ethics to minimize impacts on the outdoor world.

The first Leave No Trace principle is to plan ahead and prepare. Sergeant Lexi Jones oversees all the California State Parks in Marin County, including Mount Tamalpais State Park. “We have a fair number of lost hikers up here,” she said, referring to the popular Dipsea-Steep Ravine-Matt Davis loop trail. For a safe outing, she suggests that hikers pack extra water and snacks, allow plenty of time for the hike, and have knowledge of their return plan.

She also encourages the use of paper maps. Cell phone reception is spotty on the mountain, batteries die, and it can be difficult to orient yourself with the small screen on your phone. Every Sunday at Pantoll Ranger Station people ask Jones for directions as they shrink and enlarge the scale of the map on their phone. “Okay, here's the ocean,” she tells them, pointing to the paper map she has unfurled on the hood of her car, offering them a point of reference before setting them on course.

The second principle is to travel on durable surfaces and stay on designated trails. It's better for the environment, and safer for users because designated trails are the ones that are maintained.

It's important that people stay on designated trails to maintain the integrity of popular preserves near urban



Planners were feeling ambitious in 1989, setting their sites on creating two massive Bay Area trails — one to ring the shoreline and another to loop around hill and mountain ridgelines. Today, after three decades, lots of fundraising, and plenty of hard work, more than 350 miles of the planned 500-mile San Francisco Bay Trail are complete, as are 375 miles of the planned 550-mile Bay Area Ridge Trail. With both projects reaching their 30th anniversary, outdoor enthusiasts are invited to hit the trails for various 2019 events. Visit baytrail.org and ridgetrail.org for more details.

San Francisco Bay Trail photo by Alec MacDonald; Bay Area Ridge Trail photo courtesy Hunt Design



areas. Among the 26 open space preserves managed by the Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District (Midpen), the

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Rules of the Trail (from page 7)

trails at Fremont Older, Rancho San Antonio, and Windy Hill preserves are used daily. Like many agencies that offer public access on their land, Midpen manages their preserves in perpetuity. Before opening any land for public use, the agency goes through a rigorous process to determine what uses should be allowed based on public safety and the protection of the natural environment. Trails are diverted away from sensitive species and slopes that could fail, and trail users need to respect those decisions, said Midpen spokesperson Leigh Ann Gessner.

“Most people are self-regulated because they appreciate the open space access that we have in the Bay Area,” she said. “Just like driving, most people are courteous and respect the regulations that are there for a reason.”

The third principle is to dispose of waste properly. The dominant problem here is with dog walkers who leave used poop bags on the trail. It’s ubiquitous across the region. The East Bay Regional Park District reminds users that there is no “poop fairy” who walks the trails to pick up used poop bags. And it’s not just the bags, either. Dog waste, even when in the bushes, is not harmless as some might rationalize; it is different from wild animal scat, and affects water quality. “Good park users are stewards of the park, and good stewardship includes removing all dog waste, including the bags,” said the East



Dog walkers on the trail at Windy Hill Preserve.

photo by Alec MacDonald

Bay Regional Park District’s Dave Mason.

The principle of leave what you find, number four, is pretty straightforward. Don’t damage or take flora, and leave cultural artifacts alone. When you leave things of interest as you find them, it gives others the joy of discovery. You may have read about the hordes of people in Southern California who trampled and collected desert flowers during this spring’s super bloom. “In this day of social media and posting photos online, we realize that some people need a reminder of this ‘leave no trace’ principle,” said Midpen’s Gessner.

Leave No Trace’s next principle is related to campfires and not relevant to day-use of trails, but principle number six puts us back on track with a reminder to respect wildlife. From California newts to bald eagles, we are fortunate to encounter wildlife on our trails. The main tenets of respecting wildlife are to watch from a distance, don’t stress the animals by getting too close or being too loud, and, for their health and our own safety, don’t feed wild animals.

Horses and cattle are not wild, but since we encounter these large animals on the trail, we’ll fold in some helpful tips on sharing the path with them. Trail rules regarding horses are pretty easy. When you encounter an equestrian on a trail, stop and say hello, and ask the rider if it’s okay to pass. The sound of your voice will soothe the horse. In general, hikers yield to equestrians, and cyclists yield to hikers and





Equestrians on the trail at Windy Hill Preserve.

photo by Alec MacDonald

equestrians. If you can do it safely, pass downslope of the horse.

Hiking with cattle is a common occurrence since seasonal cattle-grazing is used by land managers to reduce non-native grasses, minimize fuel load to help prevent fire, and support agricultural operations. The East Bay Regional Park District has grazing licenses on 67 percent of its property. Midpen uses conservation grazing on about 17 percent of its 63,000 acres, with two grazing areas that overlap with public trails at Russian Ridge and La Honda Creek preserves.

Most organizations offer tips on how to hike with cattle

in brochures, on websites, and posted at trailheads. “Approach slowly, speak normally, and allow them to move away,” advises East Bay Regional Park District range manager Denise Defreese, although she acknowledges that with more people using the parks, cattle are becoming more comfortable with people and not moving away.

Cattle are prey animals. To keep them at ease, act like a prey animal too. “Don’t move towards them like a nimble-footed predator,” said Solano Land Trust’s rangeland ecologist Jasmine Westbrook during a hiking-with-cows workshop. “Instead, act like a lazy prey animal.”

When you find yourself close to cattle on a trail, Westbrook advises that you look around and away from them. “Stay calm, hydrate, and look at the flowers. Don’t clap or whistle to try and get them to move. If you’re on a bike, get off it to let them see you’re a person separate from the bike,” she said. “If you’re with a group

of hikers, don’t walk single file on a trail. Cows see that as a pack of predators.”

The seventh principle is to show basic consideration of other visitors. Sergeant Jones said that the State Parks in Marin County promote the “slow and say hello” approach. The idea is to slow down enough to announce your presence and make a meaningful connection with other trail users. Perhaps it would be prudent to adopt the slow and say hello philosophy as the first principle for our busy trails. 

Aleta George covers open space for the Monitor.

Bay Area Hosts Park Forum

From May 5 to 9, the East Bay Regional Park District and the Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District hosted the 48th annual Special Park Districts Forum, a gathering of park agency representatives from 11 states and Canada. Participants toured Bay Area parks while sharing best practices and discussing mutual challenges. Sam Hodder (Save the Redwoods League executive director, pictured on the left) and Jon Jarvis (former director of the National Park Service, center) emphasized climate science and youth engagement as key issues in a closing ceremony conversation with East Bay Regional Park District General Manager Robert Doyle (right). Visit spdf2019.com for more details.

photo by Alec MacDonald



New State Map Shows the Return of River Otters to the Bay Area

By Robin Meadows

On an overcast May morning, Karen James crouched on the edge of Rodeo Lagoon in the Marin Headlands. The sun was barely up, and the only sounds were birdsong and the distant crash of waves. The soft gray sky set off the green of the willows, rushes, and ferns around James. A wren, typically shy yet undisturbed by her presence, hopped nearby.

James was there to install a motion-activated camera to record wildlife passing by around the clock. She cares about all the animals that live here but, as part of the River Otter Ecology Project field crew, is most interested in tracking river otters. Strapping the camera to a sturdy branch, she explained that the droppings they leave behind — called scat — show that the otters frequent this sheltered site.

As if on cue, a river otter swam straight for the spot where James was hidden among the leaves. Only its sleek head was visible above the dark water and just before reaching her, it dove. “We’re lucky to see an otter,” she said. “Most of them are denning right now.”

Not long ago, luck wouldn’t have been enough to see a river otter in the Bay Area. Trapping for their luxuriant pelts drove the species close to extinction in California more than a century ago. After hunting them was banned in 1961, the



A group of otters on the shore of Rodeo Lagoon in the Marin Headlands.

photo by Karen James

otters began returning to parts of the state. Their recovery in the Bay Area is relatively recent, however, and as of last year the state range map for river otters still depicted the region as an unoccupied expanse.

This spring, the California Department of Fish and Wildlife released an updated map showing where river otters live in the Bay Area. The new map incorporates sightings from the Marin-based River Otter Ecology Project (ROEP). The otters’ expansion here reflects the headway we’ve made in cleaning up waterways and restoring wetlands.

River otters are big eaters, and the fish, crayfish, and other prey they depend on need unpolluted water to thrive. “If there’s enough food for river otters, there’s a healthy environment too,” said Sarah Allen, a biologist at Point Reyes National Seashore who is also on the ROEP advisory board. Another factor in the otters’ recovery is restoration of their aquatic habitats, from freshwater streams and ponds to brackish lagoons and estuaries.

Allen enjoys river otters for their own sake too. “They’re fun to watch because they’re never still for long — they’re in constant motion in the water and gallop on the land.” While sea otters frequent brackish waters too, they do not live in fresh water and rarely come ashore. Over the last 30 years, Allen has seen river otters spread through Sonoma County to Tomales Bay and beyond.

“River otters are reintroducing themselves,” she said. “It’s amazing to see how they’re filling up their habitat.” But no one had officially surveyed river otters in the Bay Area for decades.

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In 2012, Megan Isadore co-founded the nonprofit ROEP in part to do just that. While working on Coho salmon in Lagunitas Creek, she noticed increasing numbers of river otters there. Isadore was curious to know more about them “but there was very little information,” she recalled. “Fish and Wildlife didn’t even have them as living in Marin.” So she decided to find out more herself.

ROEP’s initiatives include Otter Spotter, a citizen science program for reporting river otter sightings in the Bay Area. Altogether, Otter Spotter sightings added about 4,100 square miles of Bay Area habitat to the 2019 river otter range map, said Melanie Gogol-Prokurat, a California Department of Fish and Wildlife ecologist who analyzes conservation data.

River otters have been spotted throughout the North Bay — Marin, Sonoma, Napa, and Solano counties — and in most of Contra Costa County, the western half of Alameda County, and perhaps one fifth of Santa Clara County. Their range also includes baylands in San Mateo County and San Francisco, as well as the San Francisco Bay itself. While Isadore welcomes all river otter sightings, she is particularly interested in documenting their expansion in the South Bay.

The Otter Spotter program also monitors deaths. “Most dead river otters are hit by cars,” Isadore said. “So many of our roads are along waterways that otters have to cross them.”

Keeping wildlife maps current is important because they inform land use planning. “The maps can help planners know which lands to conserve for habitat and connectivity,” Gogol-Prokurat said. She also cares about the Bay Area comeback of

river otters on a personal level. “I grew up in Marin County so it’s really exciting,” she said.

Back at Rodeo Lagoon, once the camera was in place, James checked a small beach in a roped-off protected area on the ocean side of the lagoon. Mother otters bring their pups here to romp in the summer. The beach was empty, but signs of otters were everywhere. “They were just here,” James said. The sand held the story.

Fresh scat and moist spots in the otherwise dry sand told her otters were there recently. Paw prints and other marks covered nearly every square inch of the beach, revealing that the otters ran in and out of the water, and rolled around in the sand. “This is a tail drag,” James said, pointing to a long, thin line in the sand leading down to the water. “These are wallows,” she added, pointing up the beach to large depressions in the sand.

River otters can be easy to miss. “There are river otters here?” said a passing runner. “I’ve been coming for 20 years and had no idea.” It helps if you’re patient and know where to look. At Rodeo Lagoon, James recommends the foot bridge that crosses to the ocean.

“We have this whole hidden world around us,” she said. “There’s lots of wildlife — just because you don’t see it doesn’t mean it’s not here.” 

Robin Meadows covers water for the Monitor. She lives near the Suisun Marsh in Solano County, and has seen river otters running down her street and swimming in her backyard pond.



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