

You can see that a sea otter is cute and cuddly. But what else is there to know about this ocean-going mammal? Float along and find out!



They're Wet Weasels

Sea otters are members of the weasel family. They live along the coasts of the northern Pacific Ocean (see the map **above**). Two kinds of sea otters live in the United States: the California, or southern, sea otter and the Alaskan, or northern, sea otter.

They Float

Right at home in the water—that's a sea otter. California sea otters stay in the water more than Alaskan ones—eating, sleeping, and even having their pups there.

Sea otters often float at the water's surface. They may wrap themselves up in sea plants that grow from the ocean floor, as the one in this photo has done. That keeps them from drifting away.

They Have Fantastic Fur

Other marine mammals, such as dolphins and whales, have thick layers of fat to keep warm. But sea otters rely on only their fur. They have incredibly dense fur—up to a million hairs per square inch! (You have only about 100,000 hairs on your whole head.)

Everything You "Otter" Know About Sea Otters

BY KATHY KRANKING; PHOTOS BY SUZI ESZTERHAS/SUZIESZTERHAS.COM

They're Waterproof

A sea otter's thick fur traps a layer of air against the otter's skin. That protects the animal from the cold water.

Sea otters are built for ocean life in other ways, too. They can close their nostrils and ears underwater. And they have webbed hind feet, which help them swim.

One of a sea otter's favorite things to do is eat! At right, one tries to break open a clam by whacking it against a rock on its chest. Below, an otter crunches on a crab.



TOM AND PAT LEESON



They Really Chow Down

Besides having thick fur, sea otters have another way of keeping warm: They eat *a lot!* All that food is like fuel for their bodies to burn, and that heats them up.

Some of sea otters' favorite foods include clams, mussels, sea urchins, crabs, abalone (abuh-LOH-nee), octopuses, and—for the Alaskan sea otter—fish.

Sea otters spend hours a day grooming their fur (below). The fur needs to stay

clean and fluffy to keep cold water away from the otters' skin.



An otter gobbles up about a quarter of its weight in food each day. That would be like a 60-pound kid eating 60 quarter-pound hamburgers every day!

They "Tool Around"

Many of the foods a sea otter eats are protected by hard shells. So some sea otters do something that only a few other

species of animals do: They use tools to get their food. A sea otter places a rock on its chest, then it smashes the food against the rock until the shell breaks. An otter may even use a rock to pry food off underwater rocks.

They're Neatniks

Sea otters spend lots of time grooming their fur—two to three

hours each day. It's important for them to stay clean. Dirty, matted fur doesn't keep cold water out.

After eating, an otter will roll over and over in the water, rubbing its fur with its paws to clean it and fluff it up with air bubbles. Sea otters are very flexible, so it's no problem for them to scrub even those hard-to-reach places.



They're Friendly

Sea otters often eat, rest, and sleep together while floating in groups called *rafts*. A raft may have a few otters or hundreds. Rafting sea otters sometimes “hold hands” to stay together.

Their Babies Ride on Them

Mother sea otters usually give birth to one baby, or *pup*, a year. The mother uses her body as the pup's crib! She carries the baby on her chest until it's about two months old.

A sea otter pup has a built-in “life jacket,” a special coat of extra-thick fur that makes it float. By the time the pup is about two months old, it has shed its float coat and is learning to swim and dive in its new “grown-up” fur.

So that's the scoop on sea otters—those totally adorable, “otterly” cool animals! 🦦

Sea otters seem to be all heads and feet as they float (right). Though they spend most of their time in the water, they sometimes come ashore (top) to rest or sleep.



4 A mother sea otter cradles her sleeping baby on her chest (above). The baby will stay with its mom for about six months.