Photo by Franklin Enos

Baby otter found alone on Carmel Beach, April 16, 1969
CARE OF THE VERY YOUNG PUP

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In the dawn's first light, a small puff or fluff on a mature otter's chest caught the eye of UCSC graduate student, Mark Pierson, on 13 November, 1969 at Point Lobos Reserve. Since his discovery of this very young otter, many volunteers have helped me maintain a watch from dawn to dusk, recording the almost constant contact between mother and pup. Only once during the first nine days was the mother seen to feed: After two short dives she surfaced with a crab and quickly consumed the ten appendages while swimming toward her pup whom she lifted on her chest; she paddled off
without eating the crab’s central portion. I was worrying about the effect the news of this would have on “Friends of the Crabs” when she returned her pup to the water and retrieved the carapace from her auxiliary pouch and polished off the contents.

To my knowledge, no other otter has been singled out to be continuously watched for an extended period. Through a 20-power scope the observer can find the mother otter far out in the kelp, her pup’s dry fluff contrasting with her darker, wetter fur. Most of the day is spent licking and grooming the pup, alternating with an occasional few minutes licking and grooming herself. She gently lays her baby on the water while vigorously rolling and cartwheeling head-to-tail nearby, frequently pausing to sniff the baby and finally coming up under the baby so that it is again on her chest. Except for these brief grooming bouts, she keeps her pup in contact with her body.

To initiate nursing she lifts her pup high over her chest, turning it so that its head slowly falls forward onto her tummy, its face sliding toward the nipples on her lower abdomen. When the pup has finished she reaches forward, clasping its chest on either side with her paws and draws it back, turning it end for end without wetting its fur. Then she cleans its face.

She occasionally changes locations, paddling with her hind feet while holding the baby on her chest; sometimes she joins a raft of otters, sometimes rests alone, but she has remained in the area between the Bird Islands and Pebbly Beach for nine days.

Our observations raise many questions. Are all otters born during this season of the year? Where do the births take place? Is this mother’s behavior typical? Why does she not eat from dawn to dark? Is she feeding at night? Could this practice have evolved because of predation by eagles during the day?

We would be interested in hearing from other Friends of the Sea Otters who observe very young pups!