

Smooth-coated otters hunting at Marina South Gardens

Subjects: Smooth-coated otter, *Lutrogale perspicillata* (Mammalia: Carnivora: Mustelidae);
Mayan cichlid, *Cichlasoma urophthalmum* (Pisces: Teleostei: Cichlidae);
Mozambique tilapia, *Oreochromis mossambicus* (Pisces: Teleostei: Cichlidae).

Subjects identified by: Contributors.

Location, date and time: Singapore Island, Marina South, Gardens by the Bay, pond near food centre; 18 June 2016; 0930-1000 hrs.

Habitat: Freshwater pond in urban parkland atop reclaimed land.

Observers: Contributors.

Observation: Ten otters were seen in a narrow pond of around 5-6 m wide (at the widest part) and about 25 m long. The otters were hunting for fish as a pack, which most probably comprise a breeding pair and their eight offsprings, apparently from at least two cohorts due to obvious size differences. The hunt involved all ten otters swimming almost abreast of each other across the width of the water body, spearheaded in the middle by the largest individual, who is presumably one of the parents (Figs. 1-2).

The otters seemed to be systematically corralling or sweeping the entire width of the pond, going around rocks and other water features (Fig. 3), apparently to flush out hiding fish. When one or more fish were caught, these were consumed on-site head first. All parts of the fish were chewed up with the otters' carnassial teeth, and then swallowed. The otters restrained their slippery prey by gripping these in their mouth or holding them down by their fore-paws (Figs. 4-5). These occasions were noisy and punctuated by shrieks and growls from the smaller-sized otters, especially since the fish seem to be only caught by the larger parents or older siblings (Fig. 6). Mayan cichlid and Mozambique tilapia were identified as the otters' prey. The otters checked all manner of nooks and crannies where prey may be concealed, including water pipe outlets (Fig. 7) and submerged structures.

Throughout the half hour of observation, the hunting pack continued along the whole length of the pond, and then doubled back three to four times. After appearing to have decimated the larger fish in the pond, the otters moved off to a larger water body, presumably in search of more prey. While hunting, the otters were oblivious to the presence of at least 15 human onlookers who were members of the public. They also did not seem to mind the close proximity of the humans, sometimes even approaching and sniffing the fingers and legs of the human spectators at the edge of the pond.

Remarks: A similar hunting behaviour of the smooth-coated otter has previously been recorded by van Helvoort et al. (1996) in Kuala Selangor in Peninsular Malaysia. This species is listed as 'Vulnerable' internationally by the IUCN (de Silva et al., 2015), and 'Critically Endangered' in the Singapore Red Data Book (Davison et al., 2008). It is regarded as 'widespread but rare' by Baker & Lim (2012), although sightings in Singapore have become more frequent in recent years. Otters are regularly seen at Marina Bay (e.g. Tan et al., 2015), but it is not certain if there is more than one group present there.

References:

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- de Silva, P., W. A. Khan, B. Kanchanasaka, I. R. Lubis, M. M. Feeroz & O. F. Al-Sheikhly, 2015. *Lutrogale perspicillata*. *The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species 2015*. e.T12427A21934884. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2305/IUCN.UK.2015-2.RLTS.T12427A21934884.en>. Accessed on 20 June 2016.
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van Helvoort, B. E., R. Melisch, I. R. Lubis & B. O'Callaghan, 1996. Aspects of preying behaviour of smooth-coated otters *Lutrogale perspicillata* from Southeast Asia. *IUCN Otter Specialist Group Bulletin*. 13 (1): 3-6.



Fig. 1. Four otters swimming abreast.



Fig. 2. Frontal view of three otters swimming abreast.



Fig. 3. Five otters foraging in the shallows.



Fig. 4. Otter grasping fish (*Oreochromis mossambicus*) with fore-paws and consuming it head first.



Fig. 5. Otter eating prey (*Cichlasoma urophthalmum*) head first.



Fig. 6. A smaller otter growling at a larger individual, perhaps begging to share the food.

Photographs by Tan Heok Hui



Fig. 7. An inquisitive young otter thrusting its right fore-paw into a water outlet pipe, presumably searching for food. Photograph by Tan Heok Hui

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