

puppy love

Oregon Zoo staffers are thrilled by a new addition to the zoo's sea otter family

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OREGON ZOO

The newest addition to the Oregon Zoo is a sea otter pup born three weeks ago today, shown here with its mother, Thelma. Pups are completely dependent on their mothers for six months.

By SARAH ALLEN
THE OREGONIAN

The staff at the Oregon Zoo call it "poof ball" or "powder puff" or sometimes simply "it." That's to make sure they don't get attached before they know if the baby will survive.

But the technique hardly works; It's impossible not to fall in love with the little guy at first sight.

"Wow! Just look at that!" exclaims Karen Rifenbury, one of four marine life keepers in charge of the Oregon Zoo's newest ward: a tiny, fuzzy sea otter pup who is three weeks old today.

The birth on Jan. 3, as well as the continued success of the healthy pup, has excited marine zoologists around the world: The baby is the first southern sea otter to be conceived, born and reared — even for less than a month — entirely in captivity.

Visitors to the Steller Cove exhibit at the Oregon Zoo can watch the pup and its mother, Thelma, on continuous video footage as the otters eat, play,

swim and sleep. Zoo officials hope both baby and mother will be on full exhibit in a few months.

On this day, it is the baby's swift, dexterous swimming that has Rifenbury so ecstatic. She watches as the pup darts through the water, flipping somersaults to its stomach playfully.

"We try not to let ourselves get too excited, but sometimes we can't help it," says Rifenbury, who has been monitoring the pup's activity since its birth. "This is pretty exciting stuff."

The pup, born to 3-year-old zoo residents Thelma and Eddie, is considered a miracle by experts in marine biology circles for a number of reasons. Though zoo staff suspected Thelma was pregnant when she put on weight in the weeks before the pup's birth, they were amazed to find the healthy baby because of Thelma's relatively young age for motherhood.

"The pup was a big surprise to us," says Chris Pfefferkorn, zoological curator.

The Oregon Zoo staff has been holding its col-

Otter: Survival in Oregon has been tough

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lective breath for the past few weeks — will Thelma rise to the task of motherhood? Will the baby fall ill, as have other sea otter pups born in captivity?

"Keepers are very superstitious," Rifenburg says. "We're being really cautious and optimistic about it. But so far we have every reason to be hopeful because Thelma's been such a good mom."

To encourage Thelma's maternal instincts, Rifenburg and her fellow keepers have taken a hands-off approach to the pup's supervision. Only a handful of zoo staff even approaches the pair, and when they do, it is from a distance to

throw food into the holding tank where mother and pup have spent the past three weeks.

Sea otter survival has been a trial in Oregon for decades. The aquatic mammals are uniquely adapted to live in the cold, harsh ocean climate mainly because of their dense fur, which is the chief reason the creatures were hunted close to extinction in the early 1900s. Although sea otters have made a remarkable comeback off the shores of California, Alaska and, in the past decade, Washington, there is still no documentation of wild sea otters off the Oregon coast.

Thelma and Eddie were both infants when they were brought to the Monterey Bay Aquarium Sea

Otter Research and Conservation Program in April 1998. Deemed not viable release candidates, Eddie and Thelma waited for a few months at Point Defiance Zoo and Aquarium in Tacoma before their new home, the Steller Cove exhibit, opened to the public last June.

Sea otter fathers are potential threats to their offspring, so the pup and Thelma were separated from Eddie after the birth. The relationship between mother and pup, on the other hand, is one of the more intensive parent-newborn kinships in the animal world. The mother sea otter keeps her young with her for up to eight months, carrying the pup on her chest, teaching it to swim and for-

age, and schooling it in the art of grooming its pelt, a laborious, time-consuming job for sea otters.

So important is the mother sea otter's job that volunteers work around the clock in four-hour shifts watching mother and baby on a video monitor and recording their behavior, sleeping and eating patterns.

"But we're not in a real hurry to collect data and go in and (determine the) sex (of) it," Pfefferkorn says. "Thelma is doing a great job, and we're happy with that."



You can reach Sarah Allen at 503-221-8143 or by e-mail at sarahallen@news.oregonian.com.

in otter words

The little southern sea otter pup at the Oregon Zoo has spent the first three weeks of its life riding through the water on its mother's chest. From up there, the pup is learning how to nurse and swim, how to groom and how to play.

And much of sea otter life is about play. Smart and inquisitive, sea otters are remarkable for their distinctive personalities, their use of tools and toys, and their seemingly endless appetite for activity.

They are extraordinary also for their survival skills; though almost poached out of existence for their thick fur coats in the 1800s and 1900s, sea otters are once again multiplying off the coasts of Alaska, California and Washington, thanks to the efforts of such nonprofit groups as the Friends of the Sea Otter and the Marine Mammal Center.

But there's always more to learn about these curious creatures.

- ◆ A sea otter is a marine mammal that lives in coastal waters in the central and north Pacific Ocean.
- ◆ Sea otters are the smallest marine mammals in North America, growing to around 4 feet in length. Female sea otters weigh an average of 45 pounds and male otters weigh about 65 pounds. They live an average of 10 to 11 years.
- ◆ Diving up to 120 feet to find food, sea otters eat clams, crabs, snails, starfish, abalone and 40 other marine animals.
- ◆ When sea otters come to the surface, they lie on their backs and use their stomachs as a table. Sometimes they use a tool, such as a rock, to help them open the hard shells of their prey. They bang the shell on the rock until it breaks.
- ◆ Sea otters must eat 25 percent of their body weight each day to stay alive.
- ◆ The water that southern sea otters live in is a chilly 30 to 50 degrees. Otters don't have blubber to keep them warm like other marine mammals do. Instead, sea otters depend on their thick fur coat for warmth.
- ◆ Sea otter fur is the thickest fur of any animal. It has 600,000 to 1 million hairs per square inch, where a human has only 20,000 hairs on the whole head. Sea otters spend so much time grooming because they must keep each individual hair clean. If the fur isn't clean, it gets matted and otters can die from hypothermia.
- ◆ Two hundred years ago, a million otters may have ranged along the 6,000 miles of Pacific coastline, from northern Japan through the Aleutian Islands of Alaska, down the coast of California to Baja Mexico. Fur hunters killed hundreds of thousands of sea otters for their thick pelts until none were visible along the California coastline.
- ◆ Then, in 1938, a raft of about 300 otters was discovered off the coast of Big Sur, Calif. The otters had hidden from poachers in a cave.
- ◆ Southern sea otters are now protected by the Endangered Species Act and the Marine Mammal Protection Act.

- Sarah Allen

Source: Friends of the Sea Otter