

[Elkhorn Slough provides an exciting wildlife show](#)

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Off to our left, a dozen sea otters bobbed around on their backs. One ducked down, disappeared for a moment and then emerged within a few feet -- staring right at me and rubbing its beard -- then swirled on the surface and dived under us.

Off to our right, a raft of harbor seals milled on the surface, but two broke off and swam 20 feet ahead. One then practically jumped on the other one's head, which in turn, slapped the water with its tail and swam in a curve around us. The other one gave chase.

At the same time on a nearby mudflat unveiled by a low tide, a half-dozen curlews probed for food with their long, curving beaks. Just then, a low-flying skein of pelicans cruised past. As I turned to watch them fly by, I spotted two western grebes, diving for small fish. We could see the silver flashes in the water of thousands of smelt.

This was the scene last week at Elkhorn Slough, located at Moss Landing near central Monterey Bay. It verified again my personal belief that this is the No. 1 spot for wildlife watching and outdoor adventures that anybody can take part in anywhere along Highway 1 from Mexico to Canada.

The peak season for wildlife watching at Elkhorn Slough starts in mid-November, and yet it's already a sizzling affair. Sea otters, harbor seals and dozens of species of marine birds -- and tons of small fish for them to eat -- can be spotted within minutes of your arrival and then enjoyed for hours. Porpoises also seem more abundant in Monterey Bay than ever; last week I saw porpoises several times just beyond the surf line, often emerging in pairs along the surface. Next month the offshore whale watching season will start as well.

Though the trip can be completed in one day for many in the Bay Area, it is best done by spending the night. For one thing, then you don't have to fight the traffic. For another, a one-of-a-kind bed and breakfast opened here in 2003 that is perfect for the trip. It is called the Captain's Inn, a renovated historic building that looks and feels like a ship, where most of the beds are made from small boats and the décor is theme-related. This is the ideal launch point for this getaway, with all adventures reachable within minutes.

Moss Landing is best known for its old power plant, especially its towering twin concrete smokestacks. But the wildlife watching is fast becoming just as famous. People love little furry guys and sure things; the sea otters, the harbor seals and the near 100-percent chance of seeing them in Elkhorn Slough answer both wishes.

There are three ways to see the otters and seals: by kayak, by pontoon tour boat or from shore with binoculars.

-- By kayak: Anybody can drive up to the Kayak Connection, set right on the water along Highway 1, and in minutes, be paddling out on Elkhorn Slough. The cost is \$33 for a half day for a single and includes all equipment. You don't get wet, nobody falls in, and the hardest part of the trip is getting in the boat. Since lower Elkhorn Slough is set beneath a high levee to the west, it is largely shielded from ocean winds.

Once on the water, the boat glides across the surface with little effort, so the focus is on the wildlife, not the paddling. Harbor seals are often within 50 yards of the dock, and the sea otters within 200 yards.

According to federal law, you cannot paddle so close to a marine mammal as to change its behavior. No problem. What happens is that the sea otters and harbor seals instead come to you. At different points, I simply stopped paddling and had them all around me. One otter swam up within a few feet, turned on its back, and then groomed its beard, as if comparing notes with me. The day I was out there, one otter, in fact, climbed right on top the bow of a kayak.

From the dock at Kayak Connection, Elkhorn Slough extends south to its entrance to Monterey Bay (on the right) and the Moss Landing Harbor (straight ahead). The slough then turns left and crosses under Highway 101. From here, it stretches inland for seven miles, amid wetlands, cut and open areas. For long one-way trips, a shuttle service is available.

-- By pontoon boat: Elkhorn Slough Safari offers a 27-foot open pontoon boat with seating, a stable platform for video and photography. The tours run about two hours. If you don't want to climb in and out of a kayak, this tour provides the best alternative.

The first wildlife you usually see are the harbor seals. They look something like black Labrador retrievers, playing on the surface, splashing with their tails and playing pop-goes-the-weasel with photographers.

You can count on seeing them because they spend a good deal of time either hauled out on the mudflats or laying on their backs with their flippers exposed to the sunlight. That is because their circulatory system does not keep their flippers warm, so they must spend a number of hours each day keeping them out of the water and warming them up.

The sea otters are then often sighted near the channel that provides access to Monterey Bay, what captains call the "the harbor jaws."

-- By car/on foot: From the public boat launch at Moss Landing -- and with binoculars -- you can scan much of the prime water where many of the sea otters often hang out. The levees along lower Elkhorn Slough west of Highway 101 are also good spots.

For bird watching, to see the widest variety of species, first go to the boat launch and harbor area along Highway 1. This is the best starting point.

Then, from the boat ramp, drive south on Highway 1 past the power plant to Dolan Road. Turn left on Dolan and drive three to four miles to Elkhorn Slough Road, turn left again and drive three miles to Kirby Park on the left. There is a beautiful overlook here where you can scan the matrix of wetlands and also take a near-level stroll with views. A launch area for kayaks is also available here.

If you want to go

-- Kayak Connection: \$33 for half-day for a single, \$45 for a double, all equipment provided; add \$10 for full day; add \$15 per person for shuttle from Kirby Park; Kayak Connection, (831) 724-5692 or kayakconnection.com.

-- Elkhorn Slough Safari: \$28 for adults, \$20 for children 3-to-14; reservations required at (831) 633-5555; elkhornslough.com.

-- Elkhorn Slough birder's list: Available for free at Captain's Inn.

-- B&B: Captain's Inn at Moss Landing, \$125 to \$265, includes breakfast and loaner binoculars, (831) 633-5550 or captainsinn.com.

-- Other lodging in Monterey: Monterey Chamber of Commerce, (831) 648-5360 or mpcc.com.

Climbing Lassen Peak and exploring Bumpass Hell and Lassen Volcanic National Park are featured on the TV show "Great Outdoors With Tom Stienstra" tonight at 6:30 on Channel 44, Bay Area cable 12. E-mail Tom Stienstra at tstienstra@sfchronicle.com.

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