

## SHORT COMMUNICATION

### A RARE PHOTOGRAPHIC RECORD OF A GROUP OF SMOOTH-COATED OTTERS *Lutrogale perspicillata maxwelli* IN HAWR OL-AZIM WETLAND IN SOUTHWESTERN IRAN WITH NOTES ON THEIR SOCIAL AND FORAGING BEHAVIOR

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**Abstract:** The Smooth-coated otter (*Lutrogale perspicillata maxwelli*) is endemic to the Mesopotamian wetlands of southeastern Iraq and it has been recently recorded in southwestern Iran. In April 2019, a rare photographic record of a large group of Smooth-coated otter gathering at one location in Hawr ol-Azim Wetland in southwestern Iran was obtained for the first time. In addition, the social and foraging behavior of the Smooth-coated otter group was carefully observed.

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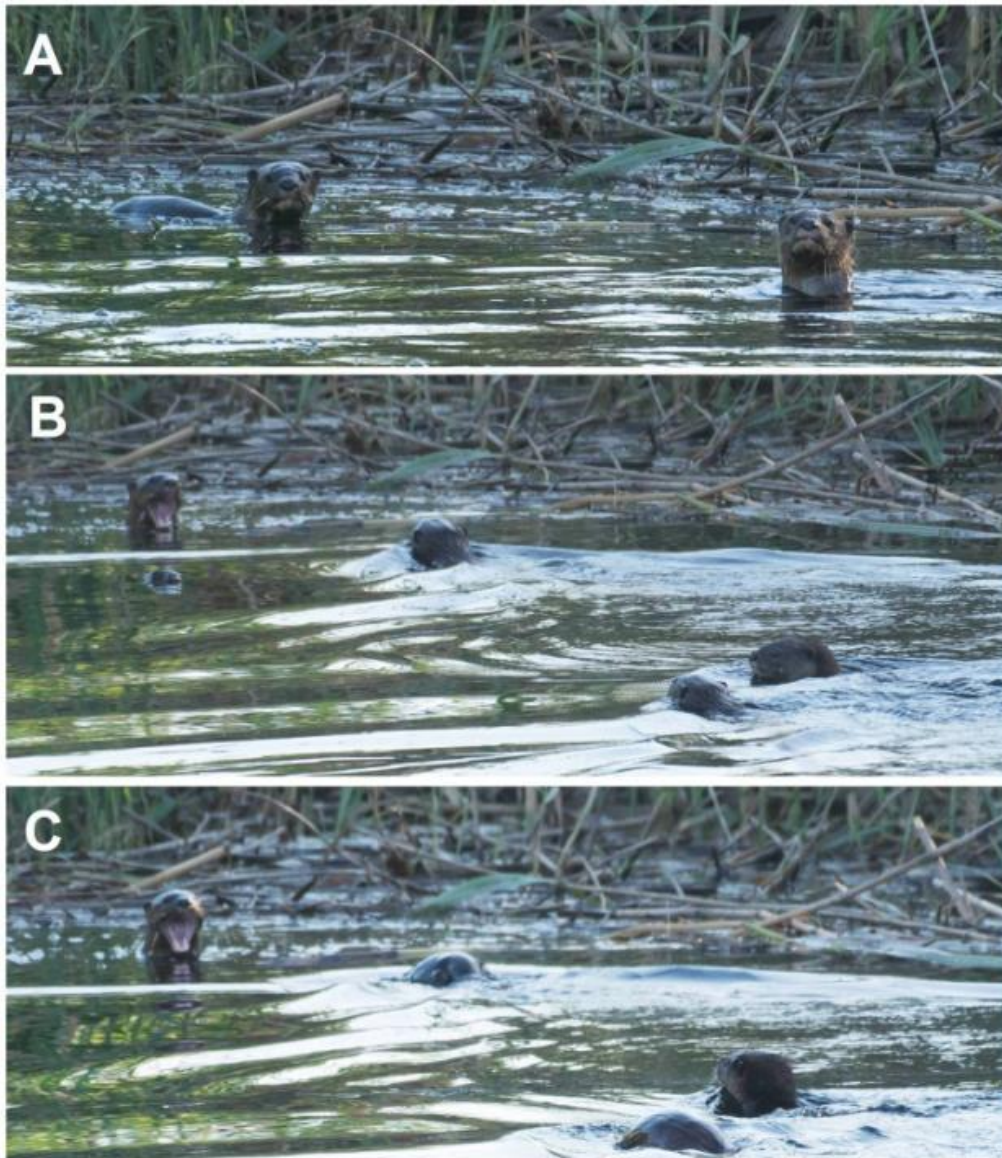
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The Smooth-coated otter (*Lutrogale perspicillata*: the subspecies *L. p. maxwelli*) is endemic to the Mesopotamian marshes of southern Iraq and southwestern Iran (Al-Sheikhly et al., 2020). It was first described from Abusakhair village of Faraijat tribe along the Tigris River in southeast of Amara, and from Daub village (terr. typ.) in northwest of Al-Azair in southeastern Iraq in 1956 (Hayman, 1956). It was believed that the Iraqi population had faded due to disturbance and habitat destruction by the Iran-Iraq conflict in the 1980s and the subsequent drainage of the Mesopotamian marshes in the 1990s (Scott and Evans, 1993; Bedair et al. 2006). Later surveys confirmed the persistence occurrence of this species in the Iraqi marshes (e.g. Al-Sheikhly and Nader, 2013; Al-Sheikhly et al., 2015, 2017). Due to excessive poaching, trapping and habitat destruction and fragmentation, the species is listed as Vulnerable by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List (de Silva et al., 2015).

The Smooth-coated otter is suggested to be possibly found in the rivers of southern Iran (Gutleb et al., 1996). Two skin specimens were obtained from the Hawr "Hoor" ol-Azim Wetland, at the border to Iraq in 1972 and another skin specimen in 1974 (Ziaie and Gutleb, 1997). Moreover, it had been recorded from the marshes adjacent to the Iraq borders (presumably Hawr ol-Azim) in Khuzestan Province but field expeditions conducted in 2007–2008 did not confirm its occurrence in southwestern Iran (Firouz, 2000; Ziaie, 2008; Mirzaei et al., 2010). Hawr ol-Azim Wetland is trans-boundary monotonic marshlands situated in southwestern Iran and extends to southeastern Iraq where is called Hawizeh Marsh and bisected by the Iran-Iraq international borders (Al-Sheikhly and Al-Azawi, 2019). It is situated in the north

of Azadegan Plain, ca. 80km to the southwest of Ahvaz city in Khuzestan Province in the southwestern Iran. The occurrence of *L. p. maxwelli* has been recently confirmed for the first time in Iran at Al-Ma'aish and Shatt Ali areas in Hawr ol-Azim Wetland in November 2017 and April 2019, respectively (Al-Sheikhly et al. 2020).

On 10<sup>th</sup> of April 2019, four Smooth-coated otters have been observed at Shatt Ali area (31°21'24.44"N 47°42'41.06"E) in Hawr ol-Azim Wetland (Al-Sheikhly et al. 2020). However, the significance and behavioral events of that record have not been discussed. It is worth mentioning that all available records from Iran and Iraq were based on sporadic and brief observations of mainly 1–2 individuals wondering in scattered places within Hawr ol-Azim Wetland and Hawizeh Marsh (e.g. Al-Sheikhly et al. 2015, 2017, 2020). In addition, reports from local fishermen had claimed that large groups of (8-12) otters were occasionally seen; however, such reports in both Hawr ol-Azim Wetland or Hawizeh Marsh had never been verified or properly documented. Therefore, our current observation represents the first photographic documentation of a large group of the Smooth-coated otters from the endemic population in Iran-Iraq foraging at one location has ever made.



**Figure 1.** The social and foraging behavior of a family of Smooth-coated otter *Lutrogale perspicillata maxwelli* in Shatt Ali area in Hawr ol-Azim Wetland, southwestern Iran. A: adult otters, B & C: younger otters are swimming behind guarding adult. Photos © Seyed B. Mousavi 2019.

The group was apparently a Smooth-coated otter family consisting of two adults and two younger adults/juveniles which were swimming and foraging in a dense vegetated marsh mainly with Common reed *Phragmites australis* at Shatt Ali Area for 20-30 minutes. Adult otters were recognized by their heavy bodies, large heads, dark-rusty grayish fur inside water, with loud “whistle-like” anxious calls of “*psi-psi-psi*” in repeated rhythm (Fig. 1A). The younger otters ( $c. \geq 12$  months) were smaller in size, had smaller heads, chocolate-brown fur inside water, and led behind the adults (Fig. 1B). The family seemed well controlled and coordinated by the adult otters; both were performing intermittent dives to catching fish alternated with guarding fits to protect the family (Fig. 1C). So far, the foraging behavior of the Smooth-coated otters has not been described. On different occasions in the Hawr ol-Azim Wetland, adult otters were observed catching *Tilapia* sp., an abundant exotic fish species (e.g. Al-Faisal et al. 2014) which may represent the main prey for the Smooth-coated otters in Hawr ol-Azim Wetland and Hawizeh Marsh. However, Smooth-coated otters were observed taking other vertebral preys such as Binni *Mesopotamichthys sharpeyi*, Tigris Asp *Leuciscus vorax*, Tigris Catfish *Silurus triostegus*, Striped-necked Terrapin *Mauremys caspica*, and Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis* but in rare occasions. Moreover, the Smooth-coated otter family seems to avoid crossing dense reed beds, as they were observed swimming through narrow watercourses.

The current population size of ca. 930 Smooth-coated otters has been recently estimated in the Hawizeh Marsh and trans-boundary populations were suggested to be found in the Hawr ol-Azim Wetland (Al-Sheikhly et al., 2020). The increased over-exploitation and anthropogenic disturbance pressures mainly through poaching and trapping will possibly push away much of the Iraqi Smooth-coated otter populations toward new refuges in the Iranian Hawr ol-Azim Wetland. It is more likely; however, our current rare observation of the Smooth-coated otter family may represent the first documented evidence to support this claim; yet, further field monitoring is required.

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## RÉSUMÉ

### ENREGISTREMENT PHOTOGRAPHIQUE RARE D'UN GROUPE DE LOUTRES À PELAGE LISSE *Lutrogale perspicillata maxwelli* DANS UN MILIEU HUMIDE DE L'HAWR OL-AZIM AU SUD OUEST DE L'IRAN, INCLUANT DES OBSERVATIONS SUR LEUR COMPORTEMENT SOCIAL ET ALIMENTAIRE

La loutre à pelage lisse (*Lutrogale perspicillata maxwelli*) est endémique des zones humides mésopotamiennes du sud-est de l'Irak et a été récemment signalée dans le sud-ouest de l'Iran. En avril 2019, nous avons réalisé pour la première fois un enregistrement photographique rare d'un groupe important de loutres à pelage lisse, se rassemblant en un lieu dans la zone humide de Hawr ol-Azim au sud-ouest de l'Iran. De plus, nous avons pu observer consciencieusement le comportement social et alimentaire du groupe de loutres à pelage lisse.

## RESUMEN

### RARO REGISTRO FOTOGRÁFICO DE UN GRUPO DE NUTRIAS LISAS *Lutrogale perspicillata maxwelli* EN EL HUMEDAL HAWR OL-AZIM, IRÁN SUROCCIDENTAL, CON NOTAS SOBRE SU COMPORTAMIENTO SOCIAL Y DE ALIMENTACIÓN

La nutria lisa (*Lutrogale perspicillata maxwelli*) es endémica de los humedales Mesopotámicos del sudeste de Iraq, y ha sido recientemente registrada en el sudoeste de Irán. En Abril de 2019, se obtuvo por primera vez un raro registro fotográfico de un gran grupo de nutrias lisas que se congregaban en una localidad en el Humedal Hawr ol-Azim, en el sudoeste de Irán. Además, fue cuidadosamente observado el comportamiento social y de alimentación del grupo de nutrias lisas

## الخلاصة

تسجيل بصوري نادر لمجموعة من القضاعات ناعمة الفراء *Lutrogale perspicillata maxwelli* في مسطح هور العظيم في جنوب غرب إيران مع ملاحظات حول سلوكياتها الاجتماعية والبحث عن الغذاء تستوطن القضاة ناعمة الفراء (*Lutrogale perspicillata maxwelli*) الأراضي الرطبة ما بين النهرين في جنوب شرق العراق وقد سجلت حديثاً في جنوب غرب إيران. في نيسان 2019, تم الحصول لأول مرة على تسجيل بصوري نادر لمجموعة كبيرة من القضاعات ناعمة الفراء متجمعة في مكان واحد في مسطح هور العظيم

في جنوب غرب إيران. أضافة الى ذلك, تم مراقبه السلوك الأتماعي والبحث عن الغذاء لمجموعة القضاعات ناعمة الفراء بعناية.