

River Otter

Lontra canadensis



Other common names

North American River Otter, Common Otter

Former scientific name: *Lutra canadensis*.

Introduction

River otters are the largest member of the weasel (Mustelidae) family in New York. They are known as playful creatures, often seen wrestling and cavorting on the shore or in the water. There is often a close relationship between populations of otters and beavers, as beaver activities create ideal habitat for otters. Researchers often use otters as an indicator species as their presence gives clues to the health of the surrounding habitat.

Physical Description and Anatomy

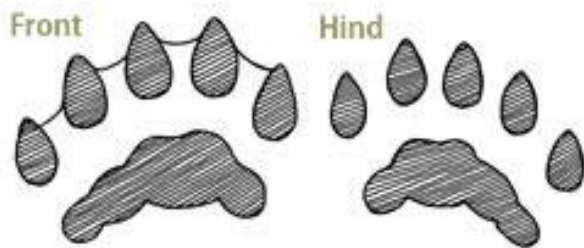
Like other members of the weasel family, otters have a streamlined body, short legs, and a tapered, muscular tail which they use along with their webbed feet for propulsion through the water. They have a broad, flattened head and their fur is short, dense, and glossy, ranging from light brown to black, with a greyish chin and throat.

Males are around 44 inches (111.8 cm) long, and females are smaller at about 38 inches (96.5 cm) long. The tail of both sexes is about 1/3 of their total length. Average weight runs from 11 – 30 lbs (5.0 – 13.6 kg). Like many other aquatic mammals, their eyes, ears, and nose are all

located near the top of the head, so they can keep their body under water while searching for predators. They can also close their nostrils and ears while swimming, and use their whiskers to sense vibrations of prey in murky water.

Identifying features (tracks, scat, calls)

One of the most recognizable signs of otter habitation is slide tracks in mud and snow. Otters will slide on their bellies along flat ground or down slopes into the water, leaving troughs about 6 inches (15.2 cm) wide. They may also alternate between bounding and sliding, leaving a pattern of dots and dashes. A scat pile or latrine area on a prominent peninsula of land or an emergent rock or tree root is another sure sign that otters are nearby. You may also find remains of recent meals, including fish scales and crustacean shells. Once you've located slides and scat piles, look for otter tracks. These are almost round, about 3 inches (7.6 cm) across, and may or may not be accompanied by tail drag marks. You're more likely to hear them during breeding season, when they chirp, chatter, hum, purr, and hiss to communicate, and they will even growl and squall when competing for mates.



Otter tracks.

Front: 2 5/8 inches long x 3 inches wide

Hind: 2 7/8 inches long x 3 1/8 inches wide



Otter scat.



Fish carcass, remains of otter meal.



River otter tracks in snow.



River otter tracks in snow, including tail drag marks.



River otter pelt.

Habitat

Otters are dependent upon permanent water and are found in rivers, lakes, ponds, streams, marshes, estuaries, and other inland wetlands. Ideal habitat has lots of emergent vegetation. They can often be found associating with beavers, and may even inhabit the same lodges on occasion. Otters prefer waterways with steep banks and lots of structure above and below the shoreline. They don't excavate their own dwellings, instead relying on burrows created by other shoreline mammals and modifying them for use as their own dens, adding tunnels and inconspicuous underwater entrances. They also take advantage of abandoned beaver lodges, hollow logs, root tangles, and rocky ledges along the shore.

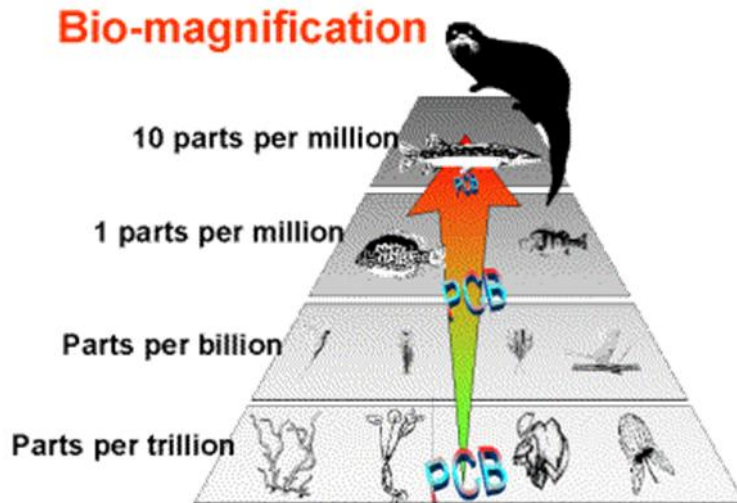
Behavior and Diet

Otters are highly social, playful creatures. The main social unit is a family group, generally an adult female and her current pups. This group will maintain a home range, but there are few territorial disputes as separate family groups generally avoid one another. They mark their territory with scat piles on prominent rocks. They're active year round, using ice holes to surface and breathe when water is frozen over in colder months. They can travel quite a distance between ice holes, as they can hold their breath for 8 minutes and swim up to 6 mph (9.7 kph).

Carnivorous animals, otters will eat fish, amphibians, reptiles, crustaceans, and other aquatic invertebrates. They will opportunistically take small birds and mammals, including young beavers, as well as fruit, but they will completely avoid carrion. In winter months when prey is scarce, they will seek out hibernating turtles. They're more active at night, but can be seen hunting and playing during the day as well. They are visual predators, but when visibility underwater is poor their motion sensitive whiskers help them locate prey through the vibrations of their movements. When they capture aquatic prey they take it to the shore to consume it, leaving piles of fish scales, bones, and shells as signs of their feeding activity.

Human Interactions

Because river otters are at a high trophic level, they are at risk of harmful effects from bio-magnification of environmental contaminants produced by humans through agricultural or industrial processes. Heavy metals, PCBs, DDT, and a number of other compounds can be released into waterways and build up in the sediment. These get eaten by aquatic invertebrates and cannot be metabolized like other compounds, so they build up in the organisms' tissues. The smaller creatures get eaten by small fish, which are in turn eaten by larger fish, each step in the food chain accumulating more pollutants. Once these contaminants reach the level of otters, they are at concentrations high enough to cause poor survivorship of young, or even sterility and infertility of adults.



Biomagnification illustration. Image source: DEC
River Otter web site.

Reproduction

Breeding season for otters is anywhere from December to May, depending on their geographic location. In New York it tends to be late winter or early spring. Females can actually delay implantation of sperm 10 – 12 months after mating, so the litter is not born until the following year, and males have no further involvement with their offspring. Young are usually born in April and May, after a gestation of about 62 days. Litters usually contain 2 – 3 kits, but may have as many as 6. Kits are born fully furred, blind, and toothless. Their eyes open at 30 – 40 days. About 10 days later they begin exploring outside the den, and the mother starts teaching them how to swim. In the early stages, she lets them rest on her belly while she floats on her back. Kits can eat solid food at 9 – 10 weeks, and she will providing food until they are 40 weeks old. Juveniles disperse at 12 – 13 months when the mother is ready to have her next litter. Juveniles may travel up to 100 miles to find their own home range, and are reproductively mature in their second year. In the wild, they can live up to 14 years, and in captivity they can live up to 25 years.

Fun Facts

Otters will make a mat of moss or grass to groom their fur.

Mother otters will let their babies sleep on their belly before they're able to swim.

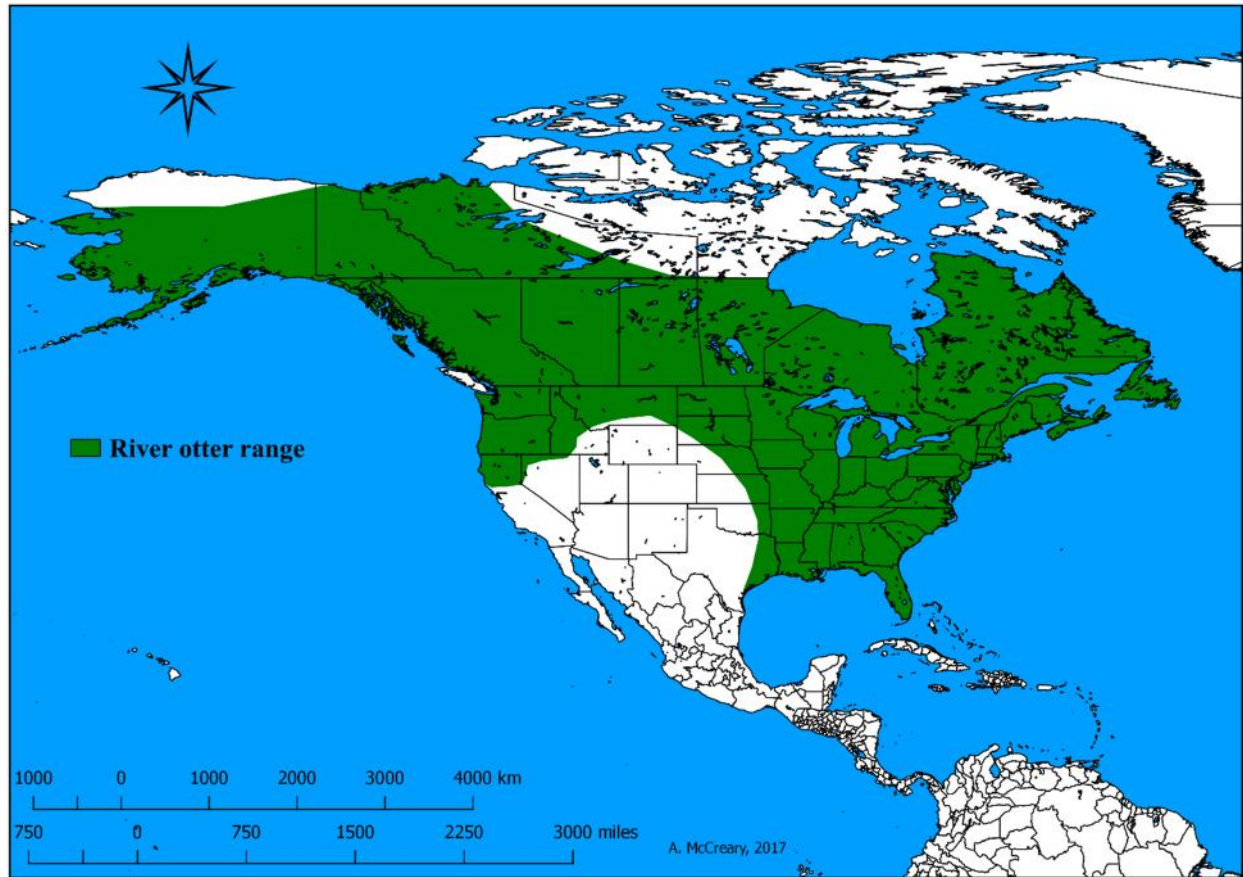
Two otters may be seen holding hands while sleeping in the water, so as not to float away from each other.

Otter scat is also known as "spraint".

A group of otters on land is called a "romp", and a group of otters in the water is called a "raft".

Range and Status

River otters are found in wetlands throughout most of North America into northern Mexico. Like many other furbearers, otters suffered severe reductions in population due to hunting and trapping as well as habitat reduction and fragmentation. Today, they are still at risk from habitat loss due to riparian development, and water pollution from agricultural and industrial waste.



Management and Research in New York

In the 1990s, the New York River Otter Project helped restore habitat and reintroduced otters to many areas they had previously inhabited. Today, trapping is allowed in New York State but it is strictly regulated.

Pictures



Trail camera image of otters at Dyken Pond.



Trail camera image of otters at Dyken Pond.



River otter eating a fish in Newcomb Pond.



River otter eating a fish in Newcomb Pond.

At Dyken Pond

River otters are frequently spotted in the wetlands around Dyken Pond and in the lake as well. You may or may not find them frolicking along the banks of the aptly named Otter Creek. Be

wary of letting your dog off its leash in otter territory; dogs love to roll in the scat and fish piles, and you'll be stuck with an extremely foul smelling friend for the ride home.

Sources

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