

River Otter *Lutra canadensis*

A River Otter is essentially a semi-aquatic weasel like fishers, martens, and mink. It has a long, slender body; a short neck, face, and legs; and a long, thick, tapering tail.

Like other members of the weasel family, the otter has scent glands located near its anus. These glands are used to mark home ranges with scent but are not used for defensive purposes like a skunk. Otters in the swamp mark their territory on the highest piece of land available, which is usually the boardwalk.

A special set of adaptations are ideal for its aquatic lifestyle. Its fur is dense with a waterproof, oily undercoat and an outer coat of long, stiff guard hairs, and its ears and nostrils are valved to keep out water. The webbed foot is fur covered except for the pads on the toes and sole. Both front and back feet have five toes with claws that cannot be retracted. Its powerful lungs allow it to swim up to a quarter of a mile under water at speeds up to six miles per hour before having to come up for air.

An otter's tail represents nearly a third of its total length and is used like a boat's rudder. An adult's weight can range from 10 to 30 pounds with females being smaller than and about 5% lighter than males.

The River Otter is active by day when not disturbed by human activity.

When swimming, it raises its head high and treads water to observe its surroundings. A river otter can remain submerged for five to seven minutes and can dive to a depth of 55 feet if necessary. Otters are not bound to water, however, and when occasion demands they easily travel over land from one body of water to another.

Their movements on land appear awkward where the motion almost makes them look like very large furry inch worms: the long body is arched with its four short legs loping along.

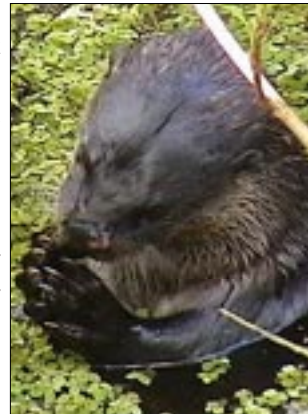


Otters are notorious wanderers in their chosen habitat, ranging over a couple of miles of a waterway. For this reason they are rarely found in the same location on a regular basis.

Vocalizations include a whistle, probably used to communicate over distances, and a shrill, chattering call, emitted during the mating season. Otters chuckle softly to siblings or mates and also chirp, snort, and growl.

Otters are not specific in their food habits, but they are purely carnivorous. Their main diet consists of fish, crustaceans, mollusks, amphibians, reptiles, invertebrates, birds, and smaller mammals.

One of the choicest morsels is crayfish, right, and where the crayfish are abundant, an otter will consume a tremendous number annually. The fish they eat are primarily slower moving rough fish rather than the quicker game fish, so they don't compete with people.



The den varies with the locality and availability of sites. Most otters locate their dens in excavations close to water under tree roots, rock piles, logs, or thickets. In the swamp, the hollow bases of cypress trees are especially popular. A typical den consists of a hole leading into the den with the main entrance below water level and sometimes a second opening on land. Otters may occupy two dens, one as a temporary resting den and the other as a permanent nesting den.

Males are sexually mature at two years of age but do not generally mate until they are four years of age, and females rarely breed before two years. Males may mate with more than one female if the females' territories overlap that of the male. Males typically engage in fierce combat during the mating season. Mating usually occurs in the water. Delayed implantation results in the gestation period extending to as much as 270 days.

Typically, there is one litter per year. Litter size varies from one to five, with two about average. The female at the

bottom of the center column had four in her litter. Females may mate again as soon as 20 days following birth, which means that female otters may remain continuously pregnant once they reach sexual maturity.

The female establishes the natal den shortly before giving birth. Newborns are about 275 mm in total length and weigh about 130 g. They are fully furred, but the eyes are closed for the first 22-35 days and none of the teeth are erupted. The young first enter the water at about seven weeks, get the adult waterproof fur after about three months, are weaned around 18 weeks, and stay with the mother for about a year. The male, evicted while the young are small, returns to help care for them when they are half-grown. The young disperse in fall or winter before the arrival of the next litter.