



RIVER OTTER

Lutra canadensis



The river otter (*Lutra canadensis*) is the best swimmer of the weasel, or Mustelidae family. It is at home in streams, rivers, ponds, and lakes and is well adapted for its aquatic lifestyle where it feeds and plays. The river otter is a remarkable animal to watch on the move, either in the water or on the shore. The river otter is nocturnal, most active from sunset to sunrise, but can be active at anytime throughout the day. Its dense fur coat has led trappers to prize it as a furbearer. The loss of habitat and overtrapping in the 1800s led to a decline in their numbers in Vermont, however, since that time the river otter has made a comeback.

VERMONT WILDLIFE FACT SHEET

Physical Description

Like all members of the weasel family, the river otter has a long, slender, streamlined body shape. It can grow to a size of 35 to 54 inches in length and vary in weight from 11 to 33 pounds. The river otter has a thick powerful tail, which is tapered at the end, to aid in swimming. Its feet are webbed and it also has claws for digging. The river otter is unable to breathe underwater so it is only able to stay underwater for as long as it can hold its breath.

As it spends much of its time in water, the river otter has several adaptations suited for an aquatic lifestyle. It is able to close its ears and nostrils while underwater through the use of internal valves. It has long whiskers on its face that are very sensitive and help the otter locate food underwater. Its dense fur is rich in natural oils, which waterproofs the coat and adds insulation. The coat is dark velvety brown in color with a lighter underside and covers the otter from head to tail. It also has

a layer of fat underneath the coat, which also helps it stay warm during winter swims.

The otter uses a variety of vocalizations to communicate to each other and other species as well. A series of chirps and chatters is commonly heard, and even loud screams can be made when it is alarmed or frightened.

Life Cycle

River otters breed in the northeast from March to April. After mating, the fertilized egg remains in limbo through a process known as delayed implantation. During this process, all development of the embryo ceases for approximately nine to ten months. After this time, the fertilized egg is implanted into the uterus wall and development of the embryo begins. After a seven-week gestation period, the young are born in late March to May of the following year.

The litter size may vary from one to five young, with two or three being the average. The

young are born altricial, sightless, and nearly helpless and are raised in a leaf or grass-lined den of a hollow log or abandoned den near water. There they will spend the first couple months of their lives slowly developing and growing. The kits open their eyes after about 20 days, at 10 to 14 weeks they are generally weaned from their mother's milk and eat solid foods, and by three to four months they are able to leave the den. The female otter is responsible for raising the young, teaching them how to swim and hunt, with the male assisting once they are a bit older. At six months of age, the young are mature and ready to lead adult lives, independent of their parents. They will reach sexual maturity at the age of two and throughout its life have typically one litter every year.

Food Items

Regardless of its playful nature, the river otter is still a carnivore that feeds on other animals. Favorite foods of the river otter include fish, frogs,

crayfish, snakes, turtles, amphibians, birds, and small mammals. The river otter will eat about anything that it can catch in the water or on a nearby shore.

Unlike some other members of the weasel family, the river otter will avoid eating carrion (dead animals). The preferred food item of the river otter is fish; they will eat trout, bass, perch, and many other species. Some anglers blame the river otter for declines in trout and bass populations, but the river otter is more likely to take species that are slower swimmers and easier to catch.

The otter will use its sense of sight as its primary means of hunting. Its long, stiff whiskers can also aid it in locating and catching fish in murky aquatic environments. Depending on the depth of the water, the otter will vary its hunting strategy. In shallow water it commonly walks along and searches for bottom dwelling species under rocks. In deeper water, it will search with its head underwater and, in even deeper water, it will submerge its entire body in search of prey.

Habits and Habitat

Suitable habitat for river otters is any wetland that provides adjacent bank vegetation, burrow sites, and a food supply. Otters can be found in streams, rivers, ponds, and lakes. During the winter, they may leave ponds and lakes that freeze over for the open water of rivers and streams. Burrows may be constructed in the bank or in submerged trees. River otters will also use the abandoned burrows of other animals and also beaver lodges.

Factors that are considered in a den site are food availability, cover, water supply, and human activity. Though otters will commonly 'scent' or mark their territories, they generally do not fight one another in defense of this area.

River otters can be seen at any time of day but are considered to be nocturnal, or most active at night. They are not social animals, a group may be comprised of a female and her young but generally the males live separately except during the breeding season. They are very intelligent animals and show a great curiosity and playfulness. Excellent swimmers and divers, a common activity for them is sliding into the water along riverbanks, seemingly just for pleasure.

Abundance

The river otter has an extensive range covering much of the United States except for the desert regions of the southwest. However, due to loss of habitat, pollution, and excessive harvesting years ago, its numbers have experienced a significant decline in recent years.

History

In the early 1900s, river otters were overhunted almost to the point of extinction in many areas of their range. Due to environmental pollution, habitat loss, and unregulated hunting and trapping, river otters' population declined in the northeast. Greater conservation efforts combined with monitored harvesting however, have allowed the otter population to rebound to a healthy and stable size.

Resource Utilization

River otters play an important role in many river and stream environments as a top predator in the food chain. They are excellent indicators of the health of a particular system and its water quality as they are very sensitive to changes or disturbances within their habitat.

Although many anglers believe that otters negatively affect the supplies of fish populations, this is actually not the case. In fact, they actually contribute to the overall health of the aquatic environment by culling the sick or weak fish, lessening the spread of the disease, and maintaining a strong and viable fish population. In addition, river otters are trapped for their valuable pelts.

Management Efforts

The river otter is not an endangered species but its population is monitored closely to regulate hunting and trapping limits. In Vermont, it is protected from overhunting with the season only lasting about four months, from the end of October through the middle of February. This time of year is chosen to protect mothers or newborns being harvested.

Another management tool is to protect its preferred habitat. There are some programs in various parts of the otter's range that focus on wetland protection and restoration to maintain current otter populations in these areas.

