



River Otter

Lutra canadensis lataxina

The American river otter is a graceful and beautiful addition to many North Carolina rivers. Sighting one can be an exciting occasion for boaters, fishermen and other outdoor enthusiasts because of the creature's secretive nature and relative rarity in some waters. The animal slides down mud and snow seemingly for the sheer delight of it.

Otters are found on every continent except Australia and Antarctica. There are seven recognized subspecies of the American river otter.

History and Status

River otters were once one of the most widely distributed mammals in the United States and Canada. However, as early as the 1500s, European settlers began trapping otters and exporting their pelts as part of the fur trade. By the late 1800s and early 1900s, otters had disappeared from much of their historic range. The decline was caused by over-trapping, but in the 20th century especially, wetland drainage and water pollution added to the pressures on otters. Populations in the coastal region survived, perhaps because of the abundance of food and the inaccessibility of large swamps to hunters and trappers. By the late 1930s, however, otters had become virtually extinct in western North Carolina.

In 1992, the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission released 49 otters in the western part of the state. And an additional 37 otters have been released in the



Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Some of these otters have made their way into North Carolina. Because the United States signed the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species in 1977, states must monitor the populations of river otters.

Description

The river otter, along with weasels, mink and several other species, belongs to the family *Mustelidae*. Characterized by an elongated body with short sturdy legs, the otter is much larger than other mustelids and is adapted for a more aquatic habitat. It has a sleek body with a short blunt snout, a thick neck, and a thick tail that is flattened on the top and tapers to a point. The small eyes and ears are located high on the head for surface swimming and the whiskers are highly sensitive to aid in the capture of prey in murky water or on dark nights.

Otters' nearsightedness may be an adaptation to improve underwater vision. The otter's feet have five toes with non-retractable claws and webbing between each toe. The heel pads on the hind feet are adapted to provide better traction on slippery surfaces.

The waterproof fur is short a

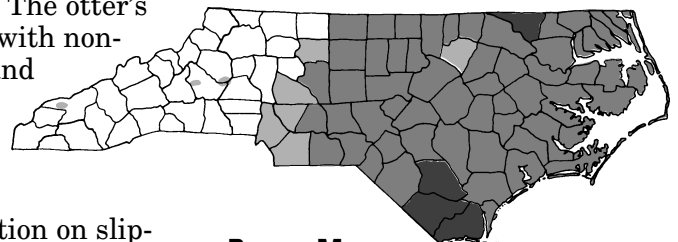
dense. It is generally dark brown with light brown coloring under the neck, chest and stomach.

Otters are excellent swimmers and are able to swim forward or backward. They often tread water to look and listen or float on their backs to eat small fish. Submerged otters undergo a slowed heart rate to conserve oxygen, but they can remain submerged for only about 4 minutes at a time.

Otters are often characterized as playful and curious. They are occasionally observed wrestling or sliding on their bellies on snow or down muddy banks.

Habitat and Habits

Otters are aquatic predators. They can live in a variety of marine and fresh-water habitats ranging from warm, slow-moving coastal streams and marshes to cold and rapidly moving mountain streams. Otters feed primarily on small minnow-sized fish and crayfish but also consume crabs, amphibians and a variety



Range Map:

High ■ Moderate ■ Low ■

**WILD
Facts**

of other aquatic prey species. Dens are often bank burrows vacated by other animals but may also be located in log jams, natural cavities, or thick vegetation. Dens are temporary except when raising young.

Otters are generally nocturnal but may occasionally be seen in daylight hours, especially in undisturbed areas. Bands consisting of five to 10 adult otters are occasionally observed, and two or more otters have been known to hunt cooperatively by herding fish.

Females exhibit a period of delayed implantation that lasts from 290 to 380 days followed by an active pregnancy of 60 to 63 days. Therefore, otter "pups" may be born more than a year after the female has been successfully bred.

Range And Distribution

River otter populations are still very low in some areas in North Carolina, but efforts are being made to restore the otter to some of its former range. Only time will tell whether these efforts will be successful. Individual otter ranges vary. In general, adult males range farther than adult females, and family groups and young otters have the smallest ranges of all. Males have been shown to move 10 to 16 kilometers in a single night. Although they are aquatic predators and live near water, they can move overland between watersheds.

People Interactions

River otters are abundant today in eastern North Carolina and can be harvested during the open trapping season. Otter trapping in western North Carolina has been illegal since 1935. Eastern populations have expanded into the Piedmont and efforts have been made to restore populations to some rivers of the foothills and mountains.



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References

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Credits

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RIVER OTTER

Classification

Class: Mammalia
 Order: Carnivora

Average Size

Length: 3-4 ft.
 Weight: 11-23 lbs. Males are usually about 17 percent larger than females.

Food

Fish, crayfish, crabs, amphibians.

Breeding

Otters are generally promiscuous. They are sexually mature in two years, although males may not successfully breed until they are 5-7 years old. Adults breed in the spring.

Young

Called pups. Pups may be born over a year after breeding because of a feature called "delayed implantation." The average litter contains 2-3 pups weighing 4-6 ounces. Pups are born fully furred. They are weaned in three months and remain with the mother for almost a year. Adult males do not help with the rearing of young and are not considered to be part of the family group. The young disperse when they are about 8 months old but siblings may remain together for several more months.

Life Expectancy

10-15 years