

West Virginia Wildlife Series

*A Guide to Mammals of West
Virginia*

*River Otter (*Lutra canadensis*)*



Volume 15

Characteristics:

The North American river otter is a thickset mammal with short legs, a neck no smaller than its head, inconspicuous ears, and a muscular body that is broadest at the hips. Its tail is powerful and a little more than a third as long as its head and body. Only the hind feet are webbed. Adults weigh 15 to 35 pounds and are 40 to 60 inches in length. On the average, females are about 25 percent smaller than males.

When prime, river otter fur appears black-brown, with the belly slightly lighter in color than its back. The chin and throat are grayish. Otter fur consists of a very dense undercoat overlaid with longer guard hairs, which are usually removed by furriers.

River otters appear to have well-developed senses of smell and hearing. Their vision is not especially good but may be better underwater than above. Several sets of strong whiskers are used by the animal in hunting and avoiding obstructions.

Range:

North American river otters once occurred throughout Canada and the United States, except for areas of southern California, New Mexico, and Texas, and the Mohave Desert of Nevada and Colorado. In Mexico they are found in the delta areas of the Rio Grande and Colorado River. These otters are now rare or locally extinct throughout much of the eastern, central, and southern United States. Range can be from 5 to 60 miles; especially for the males.

Habitat:

North American river otters are found anywhere there is a permanent food supply and easy access to water. They can live in freshwater and coastal marine habitats, including rivers, lakes,

marshes, swamps, and estuaries. River otters can tolerate a variety of environments, including cold and warmer latitudes and high elevations. North American river otters seem to be sensitive to pollution and disappear from areas with polluted waters.

North American river otters build dens in the burrows of other mammals, in natural hollows, such as under a log, or in river banks. Dens have underwater entrances and a tunnel leading to a nest chamber that is lined with leaves, grass, moss, bark, and hair.



Diet:

North American river otters eat mainly aquatic organisms such as amphibians, fish, turtles, crayfish, crabs, and other invertebrates. Birds, their eggs, and small terrestrial mammals are also eaten on occasion. They sometimes eat aquatic plants.

Prey is captured with the mouth, and mainly slow, non-game fish species are taken, e.g., suckers. The otter's long whiskers are used to detect organisms in the substrate and the dark water. Prey is eaten immediately after capture, usually in the water, although larger prey is eaten on land.

If a fish or other animal is too big to be eaten at one meal, the remains are abandoned and become available to other flesh-eating mammals and birds. Scraps left out of the water may be a significant source of food available to some scavengers when snow and ice are present.

Omnivores:

Some animals eat both plants and animals. They are **omnivores**. Omnivores include mammals like [grizzly bear](#), [striped skunk](#) and [raccoon](#) and birds like the crow, the [blue jay](#) and the woodpecker.

Because they will eat plants and animals, omnivores survive well in many environments. Some omnivores, like the [raccoon](#), the [opossum](#) and the seagull have no problem adapting to living near humans. They often will dig through garbage cans, dumpsters and gardens to find food.

What did you have to eat today? If you are like most humans, you probably had meat and plants! Humans are omnivores too! Our teeth are designed to eat both meat and plants. Our front teeth help us rip into meat and bite into fruits and vegetables, and our molars help us grind up meat and chew fruits and vegetables. Many omnivorous animals also have teeth that help them eat both plants and animals.

Diseases common to Otters:

River Otters are known for rabies and can transmit the disease to humans and other animals. There are a variety of other diseases and parasites can be responsible for river otter deaths.

Communication:

North American river otters communicate in a variety of ways. They vocalize with whistles, growls, chuckles, and screams. They also scent mark using paired scent glands near the base of their tails or by urinating/defecating on vegetation within their home

range. These glands produce a very strong, musky odor. They also use touch and communicate through posture and other body signals.

When alarmed, individuals emit an explosive "hah!" When two or more are together, they often produce a mumbling noise that seems to be a form of conversation. A good imitation of this is made by closing the lips and rapidly uttering "hm" several times in a deep voice. A bird-like chirp apparently expresses anxiety and is most often heard when members of a group become separated.

North American river otters perceive their environment through vision, touch, smell, and hearing. Their large and abundant whiskers are very sensitive and are important in tactile sensation. These whiskers are used extensively in hunting, as smell, vision, and hearing are diminished in the water.



Life Cycle:

River otters are often found in groups. A family unit is made up of a female and her pups, with or without an adult male. The family usually travels over an area of only a few square miles. The female appears to dominate the rest and may drive other animals away from a small area around the den where her pups are living.

Other groups may consist of an adult male and female, a litter of pups that remain together after the family separates, or a group of bachelor males. Male groups usually consist of fewer than 10 individuals. Larger numbers that are occasionally seen together may represent a temporary association of neighboring groups. The groups have no apparent leader. Otters travel together and operate as a social unit but do not cooperate in hunting or share what is caught. They travel over a wide area, and apparently there are no exclusive territories. Fighting among otters is extremely rare, although they are wary of strange individuals.

Males and females do not usually associate except during the mating season. Males often breed with several females, probably those whose home ranges overlap with their own.

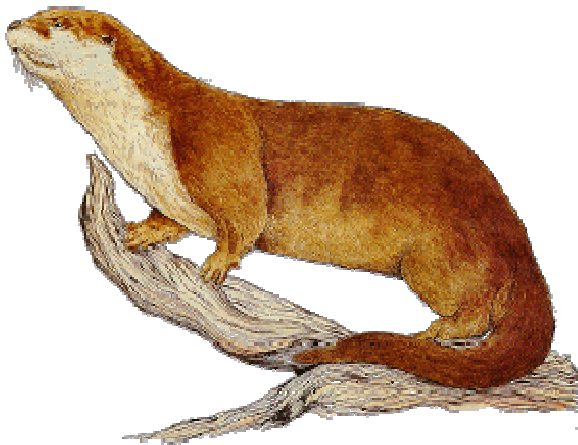
Males and females come together to breed in late winter or early spring. Gestation lasts two months, but the young may be born up to a year after mating because these otters employ delayed implantation of the fertilized egg in the uterus. Births occur from November to May, with a peak in March and April. Females give birth to from 1 to 6 young per litter, with an average of 2 to 3, in a den near the water. They are born with fur, but are otherwise helpless. They open their eyes at one month of age and are weaned at about 3 months old. They begin to leave their natal range at from 6 months to a year old. Sexual maturity is reached at 2 to 3 years of age.

North American river otters can live up to 21 years in captivity. They normally live about 8 to 9 years in the wild.

Behavior:

Lontra canadensis individuals are solitary, except for females with their young. They are known as playful animals, exhibiting behaviors such as mud/snow sliding, burrowing through the snow, and waterplay. Many "play" activities actually serve a purpose. Some are used to strengthen social bonds, to practice hunting techniques, and to scent mark. North American river otters get their boundless energy from their very high metabolism, which also requires them to eat a great deal during the day.

They are excellent swimmers and divers, able to stay underwater for up to 8 minutes. These otters normally hunt at night, but can be seen at all times of day.



Otters are graceful swimmers and propel themselves in the water by paddling or vertically flexing their hindquarters and thick tails. They can swim at about 6 miles per hour and can go faster for short distances by "porpoising" along the surface. River otters dive

to depths of at least 60 feet (18 m) and can stay submerged for more than 4 minutes. They can run as fast as a man and on hard snow or ice reach speeds of more than 15 miles per hour (24 km/hr) by alternately running and sliding.

About half of a river otter's time is spent sleeping. Both young and adults are fond of play. They manipulate rocks or sticks, play tag and hide-and-seek, dunk each other, wrestle, and slide on mud or snow.

Signs of river otter activity are seen more often than the animals themselves. They travel several miles overland between bodies of water and develop well-defined trails that are used year after year. They may flatten and dig up the vegetation or snow over an area of several square yards. Scats, twisted tufts of grass, and small piles of dirt and vegetation are commonly found in such areas. Urine and scent deposited on these piles serve as "scent posts" that are used for communication and territorial marking.

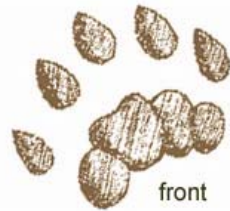
Identifying Otter scat:

Otter scat is segmented, cylindrical, 2 to 6 inches long by about $\frac{1}{2}$ inch in diameter. Composed largely of fish scales, a few fish bones, and small pieces of crayfish shell. It is always found near shorelines of rivers and lakes.

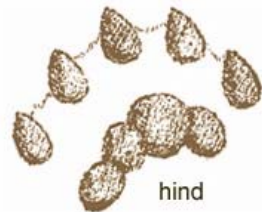
As well as tracks, scat (feces) is another sign to look for. Otters will use a prominent location like a rock or a peninsula of land as a latrine or toilet site. One or more otters will return to the same site many times, leaving an area with a large amount of scat. Fresh otter scat is dark and wet and often contains fish scales and small bones.

River Otter Tracks:

Otter tracks and sign are very easy to identify once you know what to look for. An adult otter will leave tracks that are about 3 inches wide and round in shape. Otters have claws and webbed feet with five toes on each foot.



In addition to looking closely at individual tracks, it is important to look at the overall picture, or the pattern of tracks. Otters, like all of the weasel family, are bounders. This means that when they run, their hind feet come up to meet their front feet. This leaves a unique pattern of tracks. Otters also slide on snow, ice, or mud banks, leaving a trough about 6 inches wide.



The toes are widely splayed in tracks; ends of the toes bulbous, making almost round impressions well ahead of the heel pads. Short non-retractable claws register as points at the end of each toe. The front tracks are nearly as wide as they are long and the hind tracks are slightly shorter. Four lobes pointing forward on the heel pad of each paw, but usually just three will register in tracks made by the hind feet; a fifth lobe, separate and to the rear of the others on the forefeet may register as round impressions to the rear of the track on softer ground, but probably not on firm ground. The hind toes are elongated and webbed, much like a scuba diver's swim fins, webbing may show in tracks made in mud, but not on harder earth.

Number of toes: 5 front - 5 rear

Front Foot: 2 5/8 in L x 3 in W

Rear Foot: 2 7/8 in L x 3 1/8 in W

Straddle: 3.2 - 4.2 in

Trail Width: 6 in

Slow Stride: 15 - 18 in

Running Stride: 18 - 30 in

Definitions:

Straddle - The distance between the insides of opposing feet.

Pitch - The distance a foot angles in or out in relation to the animals' line of travel.

Trail Width - The distance between the outermost prints in any one pattern.

Stride - The distance from the foremost toe of one print to the foremost toe of the next print.

Track Size - The length and width of a track. (Sometimes used to determine species.)

This series of Wildlife guides has been compiled and edited by Bill Church.

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