



River Otter

North Carolina Wildlife Profiles



Keenan Adams/U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

American River Otter (*Lontra canadensis*)

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.

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 nonretractable 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 and 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 to their surroundings.

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.

To restore the river otter to its former range, the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission released 49 river otters in the western part of the state from 1990-1995, with assistance from licensed trappers. River otters were also released in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Due to these restoration efforts, the otter population is now fully restored in North Carolina and considered abundant throughout the state. Because the United States signed the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species in 1977, states must monitor populations of river otters because they are similar in appearance to endangered otter populations in other countries.

The river otter seems to delight in sliding down mud and snow.

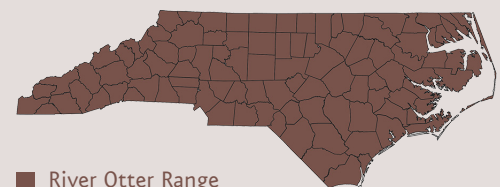


Dmitry Azovtsev

Range and Distribution

Due to efforts made to restore the otter into its former range, otters are now distributed throughout North Carolina. Individual otter home ranges vary and are determined by drainage patterns. Home ranges of adult males are larger than those of females and these home ranges can overlap considerably. While otters will mark areas with scent mounds, they do not seem to defend territories. 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.

Range Map



River Otter

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Habitats & 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 fish and crayfish, but also consume crabs, amphibians and a variety 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.

Otters are active year-round and are generally nocturnal, but may occasionally be seen in daylight hours, especially in undisturbed areas. Bands consisting of 5 to 10 adult otters are occasionally observed, and two or more otters have been known to hunt cooperatively by herding fish.

Human Interactions

River otters are abundant throughout North Carolina and can be harvested during the regulated trapping season. River otters are considered an important furbearer species; their pelts are highly valued. River otters are important predators; they can reduce undesirable fish populations that compete for food with cold-water game fish.

Due to their curious nature and their near-sightedness, it is not uncommon for otters to approach a boat or a person on shore. Because the otter's primary diet includes fish and crayfish, they can cause damage at commercial crayfish, fish, and baitfish operations.

NCWRC Interactions

As recent as the early 1990s, river otters were thought absent in western North Carolina; the last confirmed sighting occurred in Haywood County in 1936. However, river otters were common in the coastal plain of North Carolina and were slowly expanding westward towards the Piedmont region. To restore river otters to their historic range, NCWRC biologists trapped and released river otters at 11 sites throughout western North Carolina river systems from 1990 through 1995. The otters that were released into the western river systems originated from eastern North Carolina and were captured primarily using a No. 11 foothold trap. Of the various traps the biologists used, the foothold trap proved the most efficient trap for capturing otters, due to its high capture ability and low injury rate.

North Carolina's river otter restoration project also benefited the wild turkey population. Some of the river otters captured in eastern North Carolina were given to West Virginia to aid in their otter restoration efforts. In exchange for our river otters, West Virginia gave wild turkeys to North Carolina. These wild turkeys were released and aided in successfully restoring wild turkey populations throughout North Carolina.

References

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Webster, David, James F. Parnell, and Walter C. Biggs Jr. *Mammals of the Carolinas, Virginia, and Maryland* (University of North Carolina Press, 1985).

Credits

Originally written by Perry Sumner, Mike Carraway and John Williams. Updated by Perry Sumner, Mike Carraway, Colleen Olfenbittel and John Williams. NCWRC. Updated. 2018

Wild Facts

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/Young

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. The young are 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 to 15 years.



Eric Kilby