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River otter

Lontra canadensis



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The North American river otter, also known as the northern river otter or the common otter, is a semiaquatic mammal endemic to the North American continent found in and along its waterways and coasts. River otters are a dynamic, intelligent and adaptive species that can continue to exhibit play behaviour even into adulthood.

Characteristics

The North American river otter is a stocky animal of 5 to 14 kilograms (11 to 31 lb), with short legs, a muscular neck no smaller than the head, and an elongated body that is broadest at the hips. Its body length ranges from 66 to 107 centimetres (26 to 42 in). About one-third of the animal's total length consists of a long, tapered tail. Tail lengths range from 30 to 50 centimetres (12 to 20 in).

A broad muzzle is found on the river otter's flat head, and the ears are round and inconspicuous. The rhinarium is bare, with an obtuse, triangular projection. Eyes of the animal are small and placed anteriorly. A short, broad rostrum for exhaling and a long, broad cranium define the relatively flat skull. The river otter's nostrils and ears close during submersion, inhibiting water from entering them. Its vibrissae (whiskers) are long and thick, enhancing sensory perception underwater and on land.

The fur of the species is short (guard hairs average 23.8 mm, with a density of about 57,800 hairs/cm² (373,000 hairs/in²) in the mid back section. The pelage has a high luster and varies from light brown to black. The throat, chin, and lips are greyer than the rest of the body. Fur of senescent river otters may become white-tipped, and rare albinos may occur.

Sexual dimorphism exists among the river otters. Males are, on average, 5% larger than females. In Idaho, juvenile, yearling, and adult males averaged 8, 11, and 17% heavier, respectively, than females of

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the same age. A clinical reduction in size may exist from north to south along the Pacific coast, but not from east to west.

Life Cycle

River otters typically breed from December to April. Because the otters delay implantation for at least eight months, the interval between copulation and parturition can reach 10–12 months. Delayed implantation distinguishes the species from the European otter, which lacks this feature. Young are born between February and April, and parturition lasts three to eight hours.

In early spring, expectant mothers begin to look for a den where they can give birth. The female otters do not dig their own dens; instead, they rely on other animals, such as beavers, to provide suitable environments to raise their offspring. When the mothers have established their domains, they give birth to several kits. Litter size can reach five, but usually ranges from one to three. Each otter pup weighs approximately 140 grams. At birth, the river otters are fully furred, blind, and toothless. The claws are well-formed and facial vibrissae (about 5 mm long) are present. The kits open their eyes after 30–38 days. The newborns start playing at five to six weeks, and begin consuming solid food at 9–10 weeks. Weaning occurs at 12 weeks, and females provide solid food for their progeny until 37–38 weeks have transpired. The maximum weight and length of both sexes are attained at three to four years of age.

The mothers raise their young without aid from adult males. When the pups are about two months old and their coats grow in, their mother introduces them to the water. Otters are natural swimmers and, with parental supervision, they acquire the skills necessary to swim. The otters may leave the den by eight weeks and are capable of sustaining themselves upon the arrival of fall, but they usually stay with their families, which sometimes include the father, until the following spring. Prior to the arrival of the next litter, the otter yearlings venture out in search of their own home ranges.

North American river otters live an average of 21 years of age in captivity, but they can reach 25 years of age. However, they normally live about 8 to 9 years in the wild, but are capable of living up to 13 years of age.

Habitat

Although commonly called a "river otter", the North American river otter is found in a wide variety of aquatic habitats, both freshwater and coastal marine, including lakes, rivers, wetlands, coastal shorelines, marshes, and estuaries. It can tolerate a great range of temperature and elevations. A river otter's main requirements are a steady food supply and easy access to a body of water. However, it is sensitive to pollution, and will disappear from tainted areas.

Like other otters, the North American river otter lives in a holt, or den, constructed in the burrows of other animals, or in natural hollows, such as under a log or in river banks. An entrance, which may be under water or above ground, leads to a nest chamber lined with leaves, grass, moss, bark, and fur. Den sites include burrows dug by woodchucks, red foxes, nutria, or beaver and muskrat lodges. River otters also may use hollow trees or logs, undercut banks, rock formations, backwater sloughs, and flood debris. The use of den and resting sites is chiefly opportunistic, although locations that provide protection and seclusion are preferred.

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Behaviour

River otters live alone or in family groups of, usually, females and their young. They are known as playful animals, often seen sliding in mud and snow and playing in the water. Many "play" activities actually serve a purpose. Some are used to strengthen social bonds, to practice hunting techniques, and to scent mark. River otters get their boundless energy from their very high metabolism, which also requires them to eat a great deal during the day. River otters eat a wide variety of prey --- catching fish, crustaceans, lizards, amphibians (such as salamanders and frogs), birds eggs and even large aquatic insects.

They are excellent swimmers and divers, able to stay underwater for up to 8 minutes. They are also fast on land, capable of running at up to 29 km/hr. These otters normally hunt at night, but can be seen at all times of day.

Threats

The otter has few natural predators when in water. Aquatic predators include the alligator, American crocodile, and orca, none of which commonly coexist with this otter and thus rarely pose a threat. On land or ice, the river otter is considerably more vulnerable. Terrestrial predators include the bobcat, mountain lion, coyote, grey wolf and black bear. Most river otter mortality is caused by human-related factors, such as trapping, illegal shooting, road kills, and accidental captures in fish nets or set lines. Accidental deaths may be the result of ice flows or shifting rocks. Starvation may occur due to excessive tooth damage. In addition, habitat loss or fragmentation, especially in wetland environs can negatively affect otter numbers.

What We Can Do To Help

River otters, as with all wildlife, benefit from the protection and conservation of their habitat. Wetlands especially are incredibly productive and important habitats that support a myriad of creatures from insects and beavers to waterfowl and otters. Also humans need to greatly reduce the pollutants entering ecosystems. Trapping of beavers and otters have a detrimental effect on the population and are very cruel practices.

Learn about local wildlife and support wildlife conservation and education organizations.

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Other Interesting Facts

River otters possess specialized vision that enables them to view potential meals while swimming in dark and unclear waters. Their tiny eyes can easily spot food that may not be as visible to other animals. River otter whiskers are also useful for detecting vibrations -- and therefore the proximity of prey. Apart from just strong vision and vibration detection, river otters have extraordinary smelling capabilities when it comes to fish. If a cluster of fish is somewhere nearby, a river otter may be capable of using his olfactory skills to track them down -- and then swiftly traveling to catch them!

River otters are highly frolicsome, spirited and lively creatures. Some common river otter playtime activities include somersaulting, wrestling, flopping around, sliding -- all surely amusing sights to behold. Apart from just fun and games, sliding also has a functional purpose -- helping otters travel from point A to point B.

River otters have the ability to remain underwater for an alarming eight minutes at a time. When they do this, they can shut both their nostrils and ears tightly -- a means of making sure that absolutely no water creeps in.

River otters have extremely speedy metabolisms. After river otters enjoy a meal, the sustenance makes its way through their digestive tracts within the span of a single hour.

Where & When to view

River otters are active day and night; however around humans they tend to be more nocturnal. River otters are active year round, and, except for females with young in a den, are constantly on the move. They tend to follow a regular circuit that is covered in one to four weeks. Males can travel over 200 kilometres within a particular watershed and its tributaries in a year.

To observe river otters, sit quietly on a high place (a bridge, overhanging bank or tree, or pier) above a known feeding area, trail, or slide. Find an angle from which you can avoid surface glare. A pair of polarized sunglasses and binoculars is useful. River otters are wary and their hearing and sense of smell are well developed. However, they are fairly nearsighted and they may not notice you if you stay still.

Wetlands and streamside habitats are ideal. .

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