

# *North American River Otter*

*Lontra canadensis*



Photo by Phil Green

## **Physical Description:**

River otters belong to the mustelidae which is the largest family of carnivores. The group also includes mink, weasel, skunk, badger, and sea otter. Mustelids are characterized by long slender bodies and well-developed anal glands. River otters have many aquatic adaptations such as webbed feet, a flat thick tail, specialized eyes, water repellent guard hair, and valve-like flaps of skin over the nostrils and ears. They can reach up to 4 feet in length and weigh up to 30 pounds, with females being slightly smaller than males.

## **Natural History:**

### **Reproduction:**

River otters can mate on water or in land. Both males and females become sexually mature at 2 years old, although yearling females occasionally produce young. They usually breed from December to April. Gestation is approximately 2 months after a delayed implantation of 8 to 10 months. They give birth on land in the spring to a litter of 2 or 3 kits.

### **Life Cycle:**

Kits remain in the den for about 2 months before they emerge and learn to swim. They wean at about 3 months. They often remain with their family until the following spring when the next litter is born. Both males and females achieve their full size at 3 to 4 years old. They live up to 13 or 14 years in the wild, or 25 years in captivity. They are inquisitive and playful throughout their lives.

## **Range:**

Historical range included rivers, streams, wetlands and along the coast throughout the United States and Canada. Historical overharvest and habitat loss drastically reduced populations in many states; however numerous reintroduction projects have helped to restore populations to many of these areas.

## **Diet:**

River otters consume approximately 20% of their body weight each day. They prefer fish, but also eat crabs, and most other invertebrates with the exception of urchins. They also occasionally

eat birds. They are obligate freshwater drinkers as opposed to sea otters which are true marine mammals and do not need fresh water.

### **Status:**

Population size in North America is not well known but is estimated at over 100,000 animals. The population is considered stable and is not listed as threatened or endangered. They are considered a furbearer and can legally be trapped in some states.

### **Threats:**

#### **Historical:**

River otters were heavily hunted for their fur in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Because of this and habitation destruction their populations were reduced over much of their historic range and in some states they completely disappeared.

#### **Current:**

Habitat fragmentation due to development can create 'islands' and can reduce immigration by new individuals. In this way localized extirpations can occur. They also seem to be especially sensitive to toxins. Other threats include disease outbreaks caused by pathogens like such as canine distemper virus.

### **Fun Facts:**

- River otters can hold their breath for up to 8 minutes and can dive up to 60 feet. During a dive there is a passive mechanism to close their ears and nose to keep water out.
- During a dive respiration ceases, heart rate decreases, blood circulation changes and increased red blood cells in muscle tissue (myoglobin) helps create extra oxygen storage.
- Male river otters are often found in large social bachelor groups and can exhibit cooperative foraging.
- River otters establish latrine sites. They may visit up to 9 latrine sites per day. They appear to serve a social communication function, but it is not fully understood. These latrine sites are an important source of marine-derived nitrogen for the near shore.
- River otters dry themselves and maintain the quality of their fur by rubbing and rolling on the ground.

### **Sources:**

Presentation by Joe Gaydos, SeaDoc Society  
Defenders of Wildlife  
Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife  
[www.iucnredlist.org](http://www.iucnredlist.org)

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Photo by Joe Gaydos