

Welcome to the Otter Habitat



Otter Classification

Class: Mammalia
Order: Carnivora
Family: Mustelidae
Genus: *Lontra*
Species: *candensis*



Who Are Otters?

River otters are highly social members of the weasel family that are well adapted to living in water. They are mammals in the Carnivora order who belong to the Mustelidae family. The Mustelidae family, or weasel family, contains about 70 different species of animals that are generally characterized by their round ears, short legs, small bodies, and thick fur. River otters belong to the *Lontra* genus which is the genus of otters from the Americas. The species name of the river otter is the *Lontra canadensis*, where *canadensis* means “of Canada.”

What Do They Look Like?

The river otter is a small, furry animal with short, powerful legs and a long, slender body. On average, males weigh 25 pounds and are about five percent larger than females, who usually weigh only 19 pounds. Since the males are larger than the females, this makes them sexually dimorphic. Body length ranges from 26 inches to 42 inches, but about a third of the total body length is its long, tapered tail.

A river otter’s tapered tail is flexible and muscular, and helps the otter swim and stay balanced. Its body is streamlined, limber, and designed for life in the water. This animal is usually various shades of brown, with darker fur on its back and lighter fur on its sides and stomach. Its neck and head are the same diameter and they have short, rounded ears, fully webbed toes, and thick fur. This animal is usually various

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What Are Their Senses Like?

River otters have a very sharp sense of smell, hearing, sight, and touch. An otter's sense of smell is very important because it helps it locate food, search for and identify other otters, find its home, and detect danger. Its sharp sense of hearing is even more important than its sense of smell, when it comes to detecting danger on land. River otters rely on their eyesight to find food. They have a specialized lens and cornea that correct for the refraction of light caused by the change from above and below the water. For this reason, their vision underwater is just as clear as it is above water! An otter uses its sense of touch to forage for food in mud or from underneath rocks. Its vibrissae, or whiskers, also play a huge role in finding prey because they are very sensitive to changes in the water, such as vibrations.



What Kind of Tracks Do They Make?

River otter tracks show five pointed toes around a small heel pad and are about 3 to 3 ½ inches wide and 3 to 4 inches long. Tracks can be found in soft mud, damp sand, or fresh snow. When a river otter travels by land, it normally walks, runs, or jumps. Otters normally make trails along the edges of rivers, lakes, streams, and other waterways. Trails are about 6 to 7 inches wide and normally lead to slides, dens, or coves.

What Is Their Place in Nature?

The river otter plays a very important role in the ecosystem. The *Lontra Canadensis* is a predator species, and in many rivers it is one of the top predators. This means that through predation, the river otter helps to control the populations of the species it preys on. River otters are also important because they are a key indicator of the health of the ecosystem. If the river otter population is declining it means the ecosystem is not healthy.



Are They Endangered?

The river otter is considered a protected species in the world. Although the river otter population is not near extinction there is a threat to these animals that conservation efforts and governments would like to watch. The river otters are considered protected because they are in danger of being overhunted for their magnificent pelts. Because of this reason, many states have limitations on when people can hunt river otters. In the past, many populations of river otters have been devastated by hunting, but

conservation efforts have brought back these populations to sustainable numbers.

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Today, there are still threats to the river otter. As mentioned above, hunting is one of these threats. But some indirect threats include overfishing and habitat loss. Habitat loss is due to construction around many riverbanks that are destroying the woodlands and wetlands where the river otter likes to take shelter. Overfishing is causing a decline in the river otter's main food source that can also prove to be hard on the populations.



What Kinds of Adaptations Have They Made?

The river otter has made several adaptations to live successfully on land and in the water. The first one is the river otter's high metabolism. Swimming in cold waters can cause these animals to lose body heat very fast, but due to their high metabolism, they can generate heat almost 27 times as fast in water as they can in air. This keeps them warm and allows them to survive very cold temperatures. With this high metabolism, the river otter is able to convert food into energy fast, so it usually must eat a large

quantity of food. An otter's thick fur also acts as insulation, keeping the heat close to its body so it stays warm in the water.

The river otter also has the ability to stay underwater for six to eight minutes on one breath, which is a great tool for avoiding predators. Otters are excellent swimmers and are often seen "doggy-paddling" through the water or floating on their back. Large otters have been observed swimming at a speed of 9 mph. River otters have proven to be more adapted to being on land than sea otters, and can run with speeds of up to 29 mph. Since the otter spends half of its life on land it has to be able to avoid predators there, as well.

How Do They Hunt?

The river otter is a carnivore, which means it only eats meat. It eats what is available in its habitat, such as crayfish, frogs, turtles, aquatic insect larvae, angleworms, and fish, but its favorite food tends to be crayfish. The river otter usually eats 15 to 20 percent of its body weight each day because of its high metabolic rate.

When an otter hunts, it will dive headfirst and the tip of its tail will show above the surface in shallow waters. Otters will eat anything possible if there is a low supply of food. The river otter will catch food in the water and, depending on the size of the, they will eat it in the water or on the land. When their prey is bigger in size, such as a large fish, they will drag their prey on land, using their teeth.



Where Do Otters Live?

River otters can be found all across the United States except for in the desert and the Florida Keys. They live in both freshwater and slightly salty, brackish habitats. As their name suggests, they inhabit rivers, but they also inhabit lakes, as well.

River otters choose their habitat based on how much food and shelter they can find. As a result, their habitat can change depending on the season. For example, they will move from temporarily flooded marshes to cypress swamps that have permanent ponds. They make their dens in bank burrows, under trees and stumps, or in thick vegetation.



Do They Live in Groups?

River otters live in small family groups when they have a litter of pups. But river otters have strict territories which they protect from others of the same sex. Male territories can overlap with female ones but male territories will not overlap with another male territory. While families are made up of an adult female and her offspring, males also establish their own social groups. Males and females often construct separate hierarchies, tolerating each other but not accompanying one another. Young river otters love to play by wrestling and chasing each other. Although river otters do not have territories, different groups of otters tend to avoid each other.

What Is Their Habitat in the Wild Like?

The habitat of the river otter has two parts. They must have both a piece of land and water in order to survive. Because of these requirements, you will not find a river otter more than 110 yards away



from a source of water. The water also needs to be quality water, if the water is highly populated the river otter will not be able to survive. Finally the land near the water has to provide sufficient shelter for the river otters. Since the otters keep their young on land, they need either vegetation or rock structures as shelters or dens. The *Lontra Canadensis* requires a large amount of space, often up to 50 miles. Development of cities, pollution, pesticides, and other man-made poisons destroys their habitat and decreases their numbers.

How Do Otter Families Live?

Two characteristics of river otters are that they are solitary and territorial. They are polygamous animals, meaning they mate with more than partner throughout their lifetime. A male will mate with a female and then leave to go mate with others, leaving only the female to raise the young.

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A family unit will only consist of a mother and her young. River otters tend to live between ten and fifteen years in the wild but can live up to twenty years in captivity.

What Is Their Life Cycle?

Mating season for river otters starts in December and lasts until about April. Male river otters will approach as many females as needed until they find a female that will mate with them. At this point



the male will start to rub, nuzzle and play with the female if she is still interested the female will start to play back. If she is not interested, she will simply push the male away. The pair will mate and then 60 to 63 days later, a litter of two or three pups will be born. The river otter starts its life usually in late spring and early summer.

Baby otters, also known as pups, are very small when they are born, weighing only 4.6 ounces. The mother will give birth to one litter a year.

After the pups are born, they will stay with their mother for about a year, usually until the next

batch of pups are born. During this year the young will learn many skills they need to survive. The babies will be nursed by their mother for the first 14 weeks of their life, after this time they will start to hunt with their family. After one month, the pups will open their eyes and at two months, they will start to swim. At this point in the pups' lives, the mother will do anything necessary to defend her young. After the young leave their mother they will travel to find a new home range. After about another year the young will start to look for others to mate with. River otters do not usually mate successfully until five to six years after they are born.

A River Otter's Typical Day

River otters are usually more active at night but will spend most of their day grooming their fur. This is a very important task because the grooming process spreads the oils in the skin to the rest of the fur making it waterproof. They roll on the ground, rub against logs and vegetation, and use their paws and claws to comb their fur. Through research and observation, it has been determined that otters spend between 11 and 48 percent of their day grooming their fur. River otters use vocalizations and scent marking as forms of communication. Another way an otter reveals its



presence is through sign heaps, which are small mounds of grass, mud, or sand it creates. Otters also spend some of their time playing by sliding down hills of snow or ice. They are not picky when it comes to choosing a place to sleep, but river otters usually sleep on land.

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