

# North American River Otter



Photo by Megan Mullin

Kingdom: Animalia  
Phylum: Chordata  
Class: Mammalia  
Order: Carnivora  
Family: Mustelidae  
Genus: *Lontra*  
Species: *L. Canadensis*



## Habitat

- **In the Wild:** Alaska, Canada, and the lower 48 states.
- **Exhibit Location:** Social Animals

## Characteristics

- Height: length: 18-33 inches; tail length: 12-20 inches
- Weight: 6-31 lbs.
- Male river otters are larger than the females. The otter body is long and cylindrical. The head is flat and round. The tail is thick at the base and tapers at the end. The feet are plantigrade (flatfooted) and webbed for swimming and paddling in or under water. The guard hair or the outer fur is a rich chocolate brown to a pale chestnut color. The fur is typically short and dense but the northern subspecies of otters have the most dense fur. The small ears and nostrils can be closed when the animal is underwater. Like other mustelids, otters possess anal scent glands. The developed tactile senses such as sensitive facial vibrissae (whiskers) and manual dexterity. They have weak vision, acute hearing and a well developed sense of smell.
- **Lifespan: In the Wild: ? In Captivity:** 23 years (female record)

## Behaviors

- River otters are excellent swimmers and divers and are usually found no more than 10 yards from water. They swim by movements of the legs and tail. They can remain underwater for six to eight minutes. They burrow temporarily in shallow areas or in piles of rocks or driftwood. They usually construct at least one permanent burrow beside the water. The main entrance of the burrow may open underwater and slope into the bank to a nest chamber that is above the water. Sliding areas are found on slopes or on level places. The slides are most commonly found in snow. Otters are the most playful of the Mustelidae, sliding in the snow and down muddy banks. When traveling on the ground or snow and ice, otters use a combination of running and sliding. When on land, they can attain speeds up to 17 miles per hour. Otters are active during the day and night. They are highly intelligent and extremely curious animals spending most of their time exploring new streams. They may stalk bird nests as well. Vocalizations vary from shrill chirps, screams, grunts, or coughs. Female ranges against each other. Observations suggest that the male is excluded from the vicinity of the female when the female has small young. Males are allowed to join the family when the cubs are about 6 months old.

## Reproduction

- **Gestation:** 245-380 days although actual embryonic development is 2 months (due to implantation).
- Breeding occurs in March or April. 1-5 young, usually 2-3, are born blind. They open their eyes after 1 month and nurse for 3-4 months. At one year of age, they separate from the mother. They are sexually mature at 2-3 years old. Female river otters are devoted parents and much time is spent teaching vital skills to the pups. They introduce the young to water and teach them to swim. They capture and release fish so the young learn hunting skills. Females aggressively protect the young from potential danger.

**Diet in Wild:** fish, frogs, crayfish, other aquatic invertebrates, birds, rodents, rabbits.

### **History and Conservation:**

- Otters have suffered severely through habitat destruction, water pollution, misuse of pesticides, excessive trapping and persecution as a supposed predator of game and commercial fish. They have become rare throughout the U.S. except the northwestern upper Great Lakes region, New York, New England, and states along the Atlantic and Gulf. The otter has been an economically important furbearer species since Europeans first arrived in North America. Each state with otters is required to submit data on river otter populations within its boundaries. Management of otters may include: regulation of harvest, total protection, reintroduction into areas where it has been depleted and habitat protection.

### **Sources:**

- Nowak, R.M. and J.L. Paradiso. 1983. Walker's Mammals of the World. 4<sup>th</sup> edition. Vol. 1. The Johns Hopkins University Press. Baltimore and London