

RIVER OTTER

(*Lontra canadensis*)

Weasel Family/Carnivore



The northern river otter is the most aquatic member of the weasel family. Spending most of its time in water, it dens and sometimes **forages** along the shore. It is commonly found where there is clean, fairly deep water, and healthy fish populations. Otters are active all winter, fishing under the ice and in open waters.



On land, river otters can travel widely along shorelines or between bodies of water. Like most weasels, they use scent **glands** to mark their territory when they travel.

Otters are usually solitary, but males have been observed in small “bachelor groups”.

Newborns are fully furred, averaging 140 g. Their eyes open at 25 to 28 days and, at 3 months the pups venture outside the den. They are **weaned** at 4 months, and the family unit remains together for 6 or more months until a new litter is born.

Special features: The otter has a streamlined muscular body, a long tapered tail and flattened head with a short **muzzle** and small ears. Its short legs have large fully webbed and clawed feet. The muscular, flexible tail makes up 30 to 40 percent of the total body length and is used as a rudder when swimming. Males are larger than females and reach a maximum length of about 1.4 metres and a weight of about 14 kg.

Otters can travel hundreds of metres underwater, staying submerged up to four minutes at a time. The dark brown oily fur is short and dense. This, plus a thick layer of fat under the skin, keeps otters dry and warm in water. When an otter submerges, its transparent eyelids close as do muscles in the ears and nostrils. A sensitive nose and facial whiskers help them to locate

and capture prey in murky or nighttime waters. Like all weasels, otters move on land in leaping bounds and are capable of speeds up to 29 km/hr. Rough knobs on the otter’s rear heel pads gives them good traction on ice which they cross by running and then sliding—gliding as much as 8 metres at a time.



“River otters” live in all types of deep water.

Food: Fish, shellfish, **amphibians**, reptiles, rodents, muskrats, beavers and waterfowl.

Denning: Otters live on shorelines and do not dig their own dens. They use abandoned beaver bank dens or lodges, the **burrows** of other animals, or natural openings in stumps or brush piles.

Predators: Wolves, coyotes, bobcats, lynx, cougars, and owls. Pollution is an important cause of mortality due to a build-up of **toxins** through their fish diets.

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Distribution:

All Provinces and Territories

Maturity:

2-3 years (female)

5-6 years (male)

Average life span:

8 to 10 years

Mating:

March and April

Young born:

March and April

Gestation:

288 to 380 days due to

delayed implantation

(active **gestation** 60-63 days)

1 litter a year/Average 2 to 3 pups.

Habitat:

Wide variety of freshwater and marine habitats, including ponds, lakes, rivers, marshes, wetlands, coastal shorelines and **estuaries**.

Management Issues:

Especially sensitive to environmental pollutants in water and will disappear from polluted areas.

