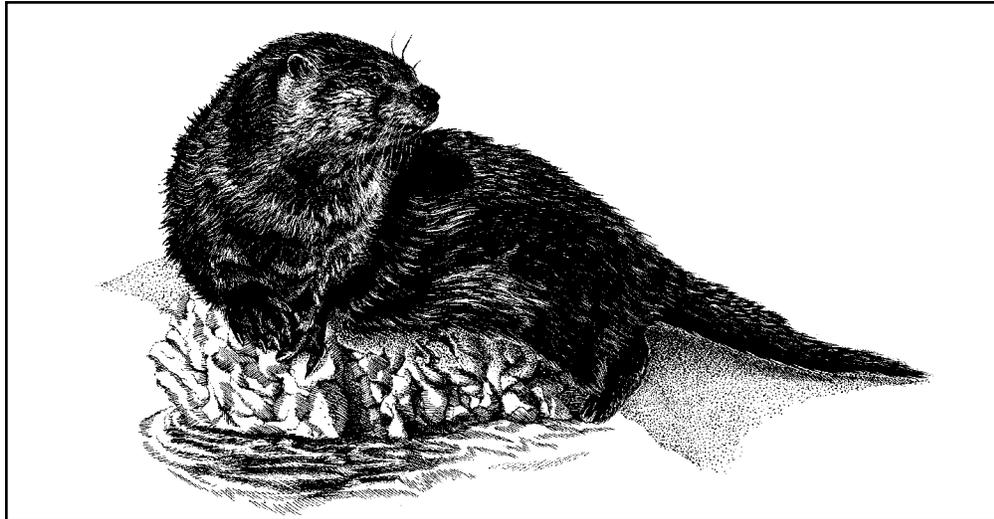
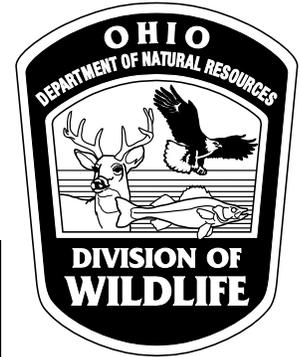


River Otter

Scientific Name: *Lontra canadensis*



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Introduction

River otters were historically distributed throughout much of North America, excluding the frozen Arctic and the Southwest. Otters are native to Ohio, but were extirpated by the early 1900s. In 1986, the ODNR Division of Wildlife began a seven-year project to reintroduce the species to the state. Over this period, 123 otters were captured in Arkansas and Louisiana using modern foothold traps and were released in the Grand River, Killbuck Creek, Little Muskingum River, and Stillwater Creek. Since then, river otters have been sighted in nearly two-thirds of Ohio's counties and young otters or family groups have been seen throughout eastern Ohio.

Description

Otters are highly adapted for swimming, possessing a long, tapered body with sleek, short, dense fur. Its small head widens to the neck and shoulders. There are long, stiff and highly sensitive facial whiskers behind and below the nose that aid the otter in finding and capturing prey. Their teeth are like those of other carnivores-- adapted for grasping, grinding, shearing, and crushing. Their large feet are completely webbed. The tail is flattened and is well muscled; the tail is important in the animal's swimming ability and makes up about 50 percent of its total body length. Maximum length is reached at three to four years of age. Adult weight ranges from 11 to 33 pounds.

Habitat and Habits

Otters live in aquatic habitats--rivers, lakes, and marshes. Otters can live in both marine and freshwater environments. They prefer tributaries of major, unpolluted drainages where there is minimal human disturbance. Log jams and submerged trees provide resting and feeding habitat. Often dens are in abandoned beaver lodges. Aquatic habitat must provide an abundant amount of prey, such as slow-moving rough fish. Home ranges are used throughout the year and can be large and linear (5 to 30 square miles). During the breeding and rearing season the range is much reduced for females.

Otters are generally nocturnal (active at night) or crepuscular (active at dawn or dusk), although diurnal (daytime) activity is not uncommon in undisturbed areas. River otters are often seen in family groups in the summer and early fall.

Reproduction and Care of Young

Otters usually reach sexual maturity at two years of age. The river otter's reproductive cycle involves delayed implantation of the fertilized egg, an arrested period of development and embryo growth. This process is not fully understood. Delayed implantation results in a gestation period of 290-380 days.

Breeding occurs in early spring following the birth of a litter. Newborn pups are silky black, blind, toothless, and helpless. The pups usually weigh four to six ounces and are 8 to 11 inches long at birth. They grow rapidly and emerge from the den at two months of age. Young eat

solid food at this age as well; however, they are not weaned until they are three months old. Litters are cared for by the female otter.

Young otters are self-sufficient by the time they are five to six months, but the family group remains intact for at least seven or eight months or until just prior to the birth of a new litter. Yearling otters can disperse up to 20 miles or more from where they were reared.

Management Plans

Otter releases are complete now that the Division of Wildlife has met the Strategic Plan goal of establishing reproducing populations in suitable habitats. The Division continues to conduct extensive research and monitoring programs to ensure otters remain a healthy part of Ohio's heritage, and current management programs are based on the best biological information available. Otter populations are monitored using many different methods, including a helicopter snow-track survey, a bridge-crossing survey, and public observation reports.

Viewing Opportunities

The chance to observe river otters is increasing every year as the population continues to grow. Although gregarious in behavior among others of their species, otters generally avoid contact with humans; thus, most sightings are accidental. The best opportunities to see otters, their tracks or other sign in Ohio are at the Grand River, Mosquito Creek, Pymatuning Creek, Chagrin River, Killbuck Creek, Stillwater River, Little Muskingum River, and their tributaries.

At a Glance

Mating: Monogamous

Peak Breeding Activity: March - April

Gestation Period: 290-380 days, including delayed implantation

Young are Born: February-April and are dependent on their mother. They generally leave the family group at 8-12 months of age.

Litter Size: 2-4 pups

Number of Litters per Year: 1

Adult Length: 38-58 inches, head to tail

Adult Height: 7-10 inches

Life Expectancy in the Wild: 10-15 years

Migration Patterns: Year round resident; young go 10-20 miles to establish their own territories.

Feeding Periods: At night (nocturnal) or twilight (crepuscular)

Typical Foods: Fish, aquatic insects, crayfish, snakes, frogs, and to a lesser extent waterfowl and mammals.

Native to Ohio: Yes

The river otter was removed from the state endangered species list in 2002.

