

River Otter

Lutra canadensis

Historically, river otters were found in most major waterways in Colorado and unfortunately trapping and habitat degradation eliminated all but a few individuals. In 1976 the Colorado Division of Wildlife (DOW) began a restoration project on a number of Colorado Rivers including the nearby Gunnison and lower Colorado. In the Roaring Fork Watershed there have been unconfirmed sightings of these animals but no evidence has been found that indicates the presence of a breeding population.

Increased awareness by the public in regards to identification of these animals will help the DOW in its search for these animals. In order to re-establish otters in our watershed, we need to continue protecting vital riparian areas and the high quality water that provide quality shelter and food for the otter.

Description

Otters are in the weasel family (Mustelids) and as such have a shape similar to weasels and mink; this can be a good distinguishing feature from beavers and muskrats that tend to be shorter and more bulky. Like other Mustelids (weasel family) otters have streamlined bodies, short legs, and a long stout tail; however they are much larger than the other family members.

Otters have a length of 20 to 35 inches, tail length of 10 to 19 inches and weight between 11 and 31 pounds. Mink are between 11 and 20 inches long with a tail of five to nine inches, and weasels are 7

to 15 inches long with a three to seven inch tail. Otters tend to be very brown to nearly black with faces that are often a bit darker than the rest of the body.



River Otter near Yellowstone. Marilyn Culp

Aquatic adaptations of River Otters include large webbed feet, and eyes and ears that close under water. Like beavers they have very short and dense underfur that's protected by longer glossy guard hairs. These adaptations allow otters to be very aggressive

hunters in lakes and streams, even in the middle of winter.

Natural History

Otters live primarily in riparian areas and they require a year round source of high quality water. These mammals feed primarily on fish, but also prey on crustaceans (crayfish), small mammals, birds, and amphibians. Most hunting takes place at night although they can be seen at all times of the day.

Otters will use many types of dens and resting places when they are not on the move. Since they do not hibernate during the winter months they will utilize a sturdier and warmer refuge. Dens can include old beaver lodges, muskrat dens, log jams, snow caves, brushpiles, and even talus slopes.

Otter family groups sometimes number over 20 animals, although groups of less than 10 are more common. These social groups are led by the adult female and can include yearlings, unrelated juveniles, and other otters. Winter is often a good time to spot an otter or the unmistakable signs of

one. Individuals will travel shorter distances and groups will tend to congregate around spillways of lakes and river pools with abundant fish. Tracks in the snow are unique with two to four bounds followed by a slide of five to 15 feet.

Breeding

Males and females are together for much of the year, however, prior to giving birth the female will leave the male and hole up in a den. Birth tends to take place in March or April and the adults will mate again immediately following the birth.

Gestation takes from 290-375 days and litters average three young, although, up to six can be born at a time. Young are born blind but fully furred and they will feed entirely on the female's milk for 8 to 10 weeks. After this initial nursing time the young are introduced to some solid food and their diet will cease to include mother's milk after three months.

Upon leaving the den for short excursions the young are taught to hunt, swim, and dive by the female with help from the male coming at six months. Young will stay with the female for seven or eight months on average and siblings often stay together for over a year. Otters reach sexual maturity at two years old, though most otters don't breed until three years of age.

Conservation

Trapping and habitat degradation eliminated otters from Colorado ecosystem. Those two factors, with the addition of road kill, are thought to contribute to most mortality today. Although otters will wander for miles in search of new food sources they see less predation than other aquatic mammals such as beaver and muskrat. Most otters are more

nimble than beavers and they possess large canines and an aggressive attitude. They may be taken by coyotes, bobcats, mountain lions and foxes.

River otters are considered endangered in Colorado and an extensive restoration plan was started in 1988 by the DOW to supplement the original release of otters in 1976. Transplants have been released in the Colorado, Gunnison, Piedra, and Dolores Rivers from six other states and Canada.



Marilyn Culp

Otters in the Roaring Fork Valley

The Roaring Fork Valley contains great habitat for the River Otter and with continued protection of riparian zones, clean and clear water, and abundant fish, it may only be a matter of time before a permanent population finds

its way here from either the Gunnison or Colorado River.

An extensive study was begun in 2005 to track population numbers throughout Colorado and the DOW asks for your help if you see an otter. Please take a picture if you can or take notes on exactly what you see and where you see it. As mentioned previously other aquatic mammals from beavers to weasels are mistaken for otters and careful observation is a must.

Spending quality time in habitat conducive for otters and searching for tracks and den sights littered with fish remnants is one method of searching. However, like most animals that depend on prey found in the water boating down the river may be the best way to increase your odds of spotting one of these elusive animals.

Please visit the DOW website for more information on otters and to report sightings: <http://wildlife.state.co.us/>.

Compiled by Brent Hayes, 2006



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