

River Otter

Lutra canadensis

ORDER CARNIVORA, FAMILY MUSTELIDAE, SUBFAMILY LUTRINAE

SIZE

Males average larger than females.

Total length 889-1300 mm.

Length of tail 300-507 mm.

Hind foot 100-146 mm.

Weight 5-14 kg.

IDENTIFICATION

It is the only river otter within its geographic range. However, it is distinguished from Lutra longicaudis, a river otter found in Mexico, because it has the rhinarium naked laterally, the soles of the feet with tufts of hair under toes, and the skull flattened dorsally.

RECENT SYNONYMS

Lontra canadensis

OTHER COMMON NAMES

Northern River Otter; Common otter.

STATUS

Common in Canada and USA. Endangered in Mexico. Extirpated or rare in Arizona, Colorado, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky,

Nebraska, New Mexico, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Tennessee, Utah, and West Virginia in the USA, and Sonora and Tamaulipas in Mexico.

River otters are included in the Appendix II of CITES.

SUBSPECIES

canadensis, kodiacensis, lataxina, mira, pacifica,
periclyzomae, and sonora.

REFERENCES

Hall, E. Raymond. The Mammals of North America, John Wiley and Sons, New York., 1981; Toweill, D. E. and J. E. Tabor (1982). River otter, Pp. 688-703, in Wild Mammals of North America (J. A. Chapman and G. A. Feldhammer, editors). The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore; Van Zyll de Jong, C. G. 1972. A systematic review of the Neartic and Neotropical river otters (Genus Lutra, Mustelidae, Carnivora). Royal Ontario Museum, Life Sciences Contributions 80:1-104.

The geographic range of the River otter extended throughout Canada and USA, with exception of the Mohave desert in Nevada and Colorado, and the southern regions of California, New Mexico, and Texas. In Mexico, they were only found in regions near the deltas of the Grande (=Bravo) and Colorado rivers. Presently, they are extirpated or rare throughout most of Central and Eastern USA.

River otters are semiaquatic, slender, long-bodied mammals.

They present morphological specializations for their aquatic life such as thick guard hair, dense oily under fur, webbed toes, and small ears.

They live in any marine (coastal) or land habitat with permanent food and water supply, such as rivers, streams, lakes, reservoirs, marshes, swamps, and estuaries. They are abundant in coastal areas and some large rivers. However, river otters are very sensitive to pollution, disappearing from heavily polluted waters.

Their dens are located in shelters dug by other mammals or in natural hollows under logs, trees, rock piles, thickets, or river banks. The den consist of an entrance, located underwater, and a tunnel leading to a nesting chamber, where they build a nest with plant material, such as leaves, grasses, mosses, pieces of bark, and some hair. Otters have permanent nesting and temporary resting nests.

River otters breed once a year, in late winter or early spring. During the breeding season a male can copulate with several females, and mating usually occurs in the water. The pregnancy period is estimated to be around two months, but because otters present delayed implantation, gestation can be up to one year. Parturition take place from November to May, with a peak in March and April. Litter size varies from one to six, but it usually consists of two or three fully furred, eye-closed young. Young otters open their eyes after one month, and are weaned at about three months. They reach sexual maturity after

two or three years. In captivity, they can live up to 21 years.

River otters feed mainly on fishes, crayfish, frogs, crabs, birds and bird eggs, and turtles, but they occasionally prey upon muskrats and other small mammals, and feed on aquatic plants. They are very skillful swimmers and divers, that can be submerged for up to eight minutes. In most regions, they hunt in the water at night. They can cover several kilometers in a hunting foray, searching for preys under logs, rocks, and in the mud. Large preys are often eaten outside the water. They have few natural enemies, but they are sometimes preyed upon by bobcats (Lynx rufus), coyotes (Canis latrans), alligators (Alligator mississippiensis), and other mammalian and bird predators.

Adult males are generally solitary, and successfully breeding adult females live with their young. Densities are quite variable, but some reports indicate densities of one otter per each 2 or 3 km of waterway in good habitat. Home range is highly variable, depending on habitat quality. Male otters mark and defend territories within their home ranges.

The River otter is an important fur bearer mammal in North America. Between 20 to 30 thousand individuals are harvested in Canada and the USA annually.

Gerardo Ceballos