



## North American River Otter

The North American River Otter (*Lutra canadensis*) is an aquatic mammal and is one of the five members of the mustelid or weasel family resident in New Jersey. The river otter is found throughout North America from east to west and extends from southern Florida to northern Alaska.

The river otter is a predator at the top of the food chain in the waterways of New Jersey and the species are indicators of water quality. The river otter is an important and valuable New Jersey furbearer. River otters were trapped and hunted nearly to extinction in the 1800s. Otter (and beaver) populations recovered after they were protected at the beginning of this century, but a special trapping permit is required to harvest them in New Jersey to limit and regulate harvest.

River otters adapt to a wide range of aquatic habitats but reach their greatest densities in food-rich, unpolluted water systems. The coastal areas of New Jersey are especially valuable. Throughout much of the state, otters tend to select watersheds that have active beaver colonies where the stable water conditions maintained by beaver create abundant food sources for the otter. Otters are usually found near good herbaceous cover that provides dens and resting areas with little or no human activity. River otters tend to select streams that do not freeze to the bottom in winter, and where open areas are common. Deep pools and soft stream bottoms are preferred.

Fish make up a major part of the otter's diet. Crayfish and other crustaceans are also important food items as well as reptiles, amphibians, clams, snails, mussels, periwinkles, insects, muskrat, and waterfowl. The most important components, however, are fish and crustaceans. River otters forage in shallow waters and eat slow moving, shallow dwelling fish including suckers, carp, shiners, bullheads and catfish, sunfish, perch, and darters. However, the diet of the river otter isn't limited to those fish species, and they will catch and eat any species of what are considered game fish, including trout and bass when given the opportunity.

The river otter has a long, thick-set and streamlined body and short powerful legs. Each foot is webbed between the toes. The slightly flattened tail makes up almost half of its total length. Mature adult otters range in weight from about 10 to 25 pounds, with a total length of between 40 to 52 inches long. As with most mustelids, males are larger than females.

The pelt of the river otter is generally gray-brown to black and has short, dense, soft underfur protected by stiff glossy guard hairs. Air trapped within the fur acts as insulation when the otter is submerged.

The lifespan of a wild river otter can be as much as 10-15 years. Sexual maturity is reached at two years of age. Breeding occurs during early spring, following birth of the young of the year with estrus lasting 42-46 days. Females may breed each year.

The river otter is an induced ovulator (eggs are shed from the ovary only in response to the stimuli induced during breeding). Implantation of the fertilized egg is delayed and results in a year-long gestation period; births normally occur in late March or early April.

Before giving birth, females normally retreat to a small tributary stream, pond or lake and take possession of a den, which is either a natural shelter or was excavated by another animal. A litter size of two to three is most common. Newborn river otters (pups) are silky black, blind, toothless, and helpless. They weigh approximately 4 to 6 ounces and are about 8 inches long. Pups emerge from the den at two months of age and by three months they will accompany their mother and travel well enough to leave the den area. The family group then moves to an area of abundant prey, where the females teach the pups the hunting skills they will need to survive as adults. Adult male otters do not participate in rearing the young.

Notes:

Since 1977, the North American river otter has been listed under Appendix II of the Convention of *International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES)*. Its similarity in appearance to the endangered European river otter makes it necessary to document any exportation of the North American river otter. All otter harvested in the United States and Canada are tagged with *CITES* seals and a permit must be obtained from the Office of Scientific Authority, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to export otter pelts from the United States. Otter are taken only under special permit in New Jersey. A permit must be obtained to possess otter procured in other manners than special trapping permits, such as vehicle kills. Permits are granted in New Jersey only to institutions/facilities that are using the animal in a permanent educational display.