

River Otters of South Florida

ROSF



Questions & Answers

Frequently Asked Questions and Their Answers

The answers to these questions are ONLY FOR the North American river otter (*Lontra canadensis*). Most of the answers to these questions can be found in “The Natural History of the North American River Otter (*Lontra canadensis*)” section of Otter Information.

Q: How long do river otters live?

A: In the wild the life span is 7-8 years while the life span of otters in captivity may be long as 15 years.

Q: How big are river otters?

A: The average weight of the North American river otter is 11 to 31 pounds (5 to 14 kg). A large male may weigh more than 33 pounds (15 kg). The female is smaller than the male and has an average weight of 18 pounds (8.3 kg) while the average weight of a male is 25 pounds (11.3 kg). The length of total body alone is between 26 and 42 inches (42-66 cm) long and the length of the tail is approximately one third the body length. Therefore, the total length of the North American river otter would then be approximately 35 to 56 inches (89 to 142 cm).

Q: What do river otters eat?

A: The North American river otter’s diet varies with the seasons and availability of prey. Fish are the most prevalent prey of the river otter followed by crayfish. The river otter also eats a wide variety of other vertebrate prey species and some invertebrate species. These include amphibians, reptiles, birds, insects, snails and clams and even some mammal species.

Q: Where do river otters live?

A: The primary habitat of freshwater otters is the riparian zone or riparian area. The riparian zone includes the area where the terrestrial habitat and the flowing waters of rivers or streams interface with each other. Clean, unpolluted water is prime habitat requirement for an otter population. There are numerous factors impacting otter populations as will be explained shortly in the section entitled North American River Otter Predators and Other River Otter Risk Factors

Q: How many different kinds, i.e. species, of otters are there?

A: There are 13 species of otters in the world. Otter are found in the New World and the Old World. The New World includes North America, Central America, and South America. The Old World includes Europe, Great Britain, Russia, Middle East, Africa, and Asia. The Sea Otter is the only otter species found in both the New World and the Old World. This species is limited to extreme eastern Asia along the Japanese island chain and north to waters off the Kamchakta

Peninsula of eastern Russia. The Sea Otter inhabits the Aleutian Islands chain and extends southward along the eastern Pacific Ocean to central California.

New World Otter Species: 1. North American River Otter (*Lontra canadensis*), 2. Neotropical River Otter (*Lontra longicaudis*), 3. Marine Otter (*Lontra felina*), 4. Southern River Otter (*Lontra provocax*), 5. Giant River Otter (*Pteronura brasiliensis*), and 6. Sea Otter (*Enhydra lutris*)

Old World Otter Species: 1. Eurasian Otter (*Lutra lutra*), 2. Spotted-necked Otter (*Hydricetus [Lutra] maculicollis*), 3. Hairy-nosed Otter (*Lutra sumatrana*), 4. Smooth-coated Otter (*Lutrogale perspicillata*), 5. African Clawless Otter (*Aonyx capensis*), 6. Asian Small-clawed Otter (*Aonyx cinerea*), and 7. Congo Clawless Otter (*Aonyx congicus*)

Q: Where do these different species of otters live?

A: For information on where these 13 species of otters live exit out to this website's HOME page and click on the Otter Information tab. Once in Otter Information look in the folder entitled The World's Otters. If you would like to know more about The World's Otters this author wishes to recommend an excellent book: Otters of the World by Paul Xoxon and Grace M. Yoxon. 2014. Published by Whittles Publishing, Dunbeath, Scotland, UK.

Q: Are river otters dangerous?

A: Yes, otters are indeed dangerous. It is recommended you not attempt to feed or approach any otter, try to attract their attention, or allow them to approach you and/or your pet.

Q: Has anyone ever been bitten by a river otter?

A: Yes, numerous people have been by the North American River otter in the United States and Canada. As a point of warning, more people have been attacked by river otters in Florida than anywhere else in North America.

Q: Why have people or their pets been bitten by a river otter?

A: There are numerous theories about why these attacks have occurred. These theories include: The female is protecting her young; a food supply is being protected; a male may attack as the female he is with is in heat or; the presence and vocalizations of person's pet may pose some type of threat to the otter. In summary, it cannot be explained with any degree of certainty why otters attack humans and/or their pets.

Q: What can I do to prevent being bitten by a river otter?

A: It is recommended you not attempt to feed or approach any otter, try to attract their attention, or allow them to approach you and/or your pet.

Q: Are there a lot of river otters in Florida?

A: No research has been conducted in Florida to determine the otter population in this state. This author has been collecting word-of-mouth statements from people who have observed otters in southwest Florida. This author has personally made numerous sightings of river otters in southwest Florida. Most of these southwest Florida otter sightings were recorded from urban residential communities, especially those communities designed to include lakes and ponds. Numerous south Florida otter sightings, both alive and dead, have been posted on the internet. Based upon the observations of this author and others the otter population in southwest Florida does not appear to be facing any significant environmental or physical threats and

should probably be considered stable and commonly seen. The River Otters of South Florida (ROSF) website is undertaking two river otter investigations in the state of Florida and they are: (1) a river otter population study of south Florida and (2) an ongoing river otter roadway mortality study in the state of Florida

Q: Are pets in danger from river otters?

A: Yes, there are a number of instances where otters have attacked a pet owner's dog. There have been several accounts where otters have attempted to drag a dog into the water and in some instances were successful in drowning a dog.

Q: How do you tell whether a river otter is a male or female?

A: If the otter is by itself it's difficult to determine its sex. If you see two otters together during their breeding season the larger of the two is likely the male. In some instances, river otter females may have a helper to assist with rearing of her pups. This may be a young female or male related to the adult female. When the adult female is with a helper the larger of the two will be the female.

Q: What's a group of river otters called?

A: A group of river otters inhabiting fresh water or coastal marine waters have been referred to as a bevy, family, lodge, or a romp. Romp, is probably a somewhat familiar name for a group of river otters. Other than "family", the other names mentioned above are archaic in their usage. In current times, we know more about the composition of river otter groups. In present times a mother river otter and her pups are referred to as a family of otters. This family unit may have an additional member-the "helper." The helper assists the mother otter in rearing of the pups. It is thought by some that the male is a member of the family unit-he is not! The male otter only visits the female when she is in heat, i.e. during the breeding season. In temperate North America the female may be in heat in the Spring while she is caring for her young. In this climatic region the adult male may visit and breed the female while she is caring for the young. A group of sea otters is called a raft as they will wrap themselves in sea weed, frequently kelp, or hold hands to prevent themselves from floating away from the group.

Q: How many river otters are born to a litter?

A: The number of young per litter can vary from one to as many as five. The young are born blind, without teeth, and fully furred.

Q: How do you tell one river otter from another?

A: Telling one river otter from another is quite difficult when seeing three or more of them together. Should you see only two otters together and you have seen them together several times you might be able to tell one from the other. There are a number of characteristics you should look for when trying to determine who's who. Their size at different ages; the color of their fur on the back, sides, belly and the throat; the shape, color, and locations of various markings on the face, the presence or absence of scars on the face or nicks or splits on the ears, the appearance of or lack of wear to the teeth (upper and lower canines and incisors); the presence and shape or lack of a pigmented pattern on the gum area below the lower canine and incisors and; injuries to the toes, feet and tail, abnormalities in how they walk or run

Q: What's delayed implantation?

A: Delayed implantation, also known as embryonic diapause, is a temporary pause of embryonic development and is part of a reproductive strategy of the North American river otter and a number of other mammal species. This reproductive strategy is most common among the closest relatives of the otters-the other mustelids. The preamble of this process begins when the cells of the fertilized egg begin to divide. As the cells divide they form a hollow, 32 cell stage called the blastula. These blastula cells cease to further divide in mammals having delayed implantation. At this stage the blastula is in the uterus and ready for implantation in the uterine wall. The hormones, controlling and preparing the uterine wall for implantation, are not activated and the uterus cannot accept implantation of the blastula. And, without implantation, the blastula remains in a state of dormancy within the uterus. For the blastula to be able to implant in the uterus some environmental cue needs to stimulate the endocrine system to prepare the uterine lining for implantation. The primary environmental cue appears to be the increase in the lengthening of daylight at various latitudes. This author agrees the increase in daylight is the primary environmental cue in the northerly latitudes. Substantial research has been conducted to demonstrate delayed implantation occurs in North American river otters inhabiting seasonal climates. However, this should not be considered the case for the North American river otter inhabiting the latitude of southern Florida.

This author hypothesizes that delayed implantation does not occur in the North American river otter in the more southerly latitude of south Florida and breeding occurring in November and December and parturition occurring in the early months of the year can be confirmed. As otters are induced ovulators one might assume this inducement stimulates the endocrine system to prepare the uterus for implantation of the blastula shortly after it is formed. The minor increase in the length of daylight after the Winter Solstice (December 21 st) is but a few seconds a day and does not likely function as an environmental cue connected to successful reproduction of river otters in the southern latitude of Florida.

Climatic conditions of southern Florida are significantly different than north temperate North America. South Florida has only two seasons-wet and dry. There is no clearly defined Spring, Summer, Fall, and Winter seasons.

Q: Why does a river otter have delayed implantation?

A: By delaying implantation of the blastula, through the cold weather of the northern climates in North America, the female is not required to consume energy for both her survival and the survival of fetuses she would be carrying.

Q: How long is a river otter's pregnancy (what's the length of the gestation period)?

A: North America river otters may or may not demonstrate delayed implantation of the blastula. This means two types of gestation may occur as follows:

(1) Delayed Implantation Gestation(DIG): The time when the blastula floats freely in the uterus and is not implanted. Delayed implantation may be eight to 10 months in duration.

(2) Actual Gestation (AG): Actual gestation is the time from when the blastula is implanted in the uterus to when the offspring are born. There have been a number scientific investigations as to the length of AG in the North American river otter. It appears the average AG is about 60 days (two months).

If DIG is part of the equation then an otter can be pregnant for as long as one year or slightly longer.

Q: How big is a baby river otter when its born?

A: When a North American river otter pup is born it weighs approximately 5 ounces (142 grams)

Q: Where does the mother give birth to the baby river otters?

A: The pups are born in the den the female specifically selects to give birth and care for the helpless pups until they are adequately grown to come out of the den. This is the natal den.

Q: What's are baby river otters called?

A: Baby otters as well as the young otters still with the female are called pups

Q: Who are the river otters' enemies (who preys upon them)?

A: Osprey, bald eagles, black bears, Florida panther/cougars, bobcats, coyotes, feral dogs, alligators and crocodiles, wild hogs and large invasive snakes are all potential otter predators. Ospreys, bald eagles, wild Hogs, black bears, and bobcats are likely to only take injured young which cannot keep up with the movements of the family unit. Healthy adults may be taken by the Florida panther or cougar as this is a large, agile, and efficient predator and could ambush and capture an adult otter as well as its pups. Roadway mortality from motorized vehicles is probably the most prevalent factor in reducing otter populations in southern Florida. South Florida has extensive urban residential development. Along with high population densities high densities of motorized vehicles occur on roadways. During the time of the year when the mother otter is rearing her pups the otter family is frequently exposed to vehicular traffic mortality. It would not be uncommon for the mother and one or more of her pups to be struck by a motorized vehicle as they cross a roadway single file and in close contact with one another together (personal observation). Probably the most significant impact on otter populations by motorized vehicles are the roadway mortalities of adult males during the south Florida November and December breeding season. This is the time of the year when seasonal residents and their motorized vehicles are present in large numbers. During the breeding season the male travels through the territories of several females and breeds with these females. Otters are induced ovulators, i.e. they must breed several times during the breeding cycle before the female can ovulate. Should the male become a roadway mortality, as he travels through the females' territories, those females will not be bred and no offspring will be born the coming year. This scenario has a very significant impact on the future of an otter population in any given region in south Florida.

Q: At what age is a river otter an adult (sexually mature)?

A: Male and female North American river otter are considered mature at two years of age. However, females have been documented breeding at less than two years of age. The male, on the other hand, does not normally breed until five to seven years of age.

Q: How old are river otters when they have their first babies?

A: A female may give birth as early as shortly before two years of age. It is more common for females to give birth after they are two years old

Q: What's an otter?

A: First of all, an otter is a mammal which means they secrete milk from specialized glands, called mammary glands, to nourish their young. All mammals have hair. Mammals give birth to live young, although the platypus and echidna (spiny anteater) young hatch from eggs. The platypus lays its eggs in a nest burrowed in the bank of a stream. The young of the platypus and echidna feed on milk secreted from pores on the female's abdomen. While the platypus lays several eggs the echidna produces only one egg which is hatched in a specialized pouch on the female's abdomen called an incubatorium. Mammals have a four-chambered heart and their red blood cells have no nucleus. A muscular diaphragm is present in mammals and aids in efficient respiration. Birds also have a diaphragm and unlike mammals it is not muscular. The platypus has embryonic teeth that are replaced by horny plates that help process food the platypus consumes. The echidna has no teeth. The rest of the mammals have a series of differently appearing teeth along the lower and upper jaws. The shape and surface of these different teeth are specialized in the various mammals to process various, specific food types. The lower jaw of the mammal, other than in the echidna, is composed of a single bone. This, one-piece, lower jaw is far more rigid than the three piece lower jaw bone of reptiles. Otters are certainly mammals but, what kind of mammal?

Otters are classified as carnivores, as are canines (dogs), felines (cats), Ursids (bears), Hyaenids (hyaenas), Procyonids (raccoons and their allies) and the mongooses and civets. Being a carnivore means this type of mammal is adapted to eating meat. This adaptation is reflected in the modification of the teeth. The last premolar of the upper jaw and the first molar of the lower jaw are modified, self-sharpening, and work together to shear, rather than tear meat, from the carnivores' prey. Together, the upper last premolar and the lower first molar are referred to as the "carnassials".

Q: What kind (species) of otters can be found in the United States?

A: The North American River Otter (*Lontra canadensis*) and the Sea Otter (*Enhydra lutris*).

Q: Where would you find otters in the United States?

A: The North American river otter is found throughout most of North America except for relatively dry areas in parts of southern California, Nevada, Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado and southwest Texas and the colder areas of extreme northern Canada. A recent publication described a small, relic population of the North American river otter occurring in northwestern Mexico. River otters also inhabit coastal marine waters of North America. Sea otters occur in the Pacific Ocean from central California northward

Q: Who are otters related to?

A: For more information on the relatives of the river otter return to this website's home page and click on the Otter Information tab. Once in the Otter Information section click on The Otters' Closest Relatives tab.

Q: Do otters make good pets?

A: Wild animals, in general, do not make good pets

Q: Where can you buy an otter?

A: All though for sale, this website does not support individuals having otters as pets. Therefore, a recommendation as to where a person could buy an otter, will not be made.

Q: Is there a good book on otters?

A: There are many good books on otters. If you would like to know more about The World's Otters, the author wishes to recommend an excellent book: Otters of the World by Paul Xoxon and Grace M. Yoxon. 2014. Published by Whittles Publishing, Dunbeath, Scotland, UK.

Q: Is there a list of books about otters?

A: Yes, there is a list of books written on otters in this website. Whether you are looking for otter books for children or more scientific books on otters there are far too many to list here. Should you wish to view a list of books written on otters return to the Home page and click the Otter Information tab. When Otter Information opens click the Books about Otters tab

Q: Do otters carry diseases?

A: Yes. Research has demonstrated river otters are susceptible to several diseases

Q: Do otters carry rabies?

A: Otters have been examined after they had died and some were determined to carry the rabies virus.

Q: What do you do if you are bitten by an otter?

A: It is very important that should you or someone else you know been bitten by an otter immediate medical treatment should occur. The physician who treats the injuries you have received should discuss the course medical treatment that you should receive regarding rabies.

Q: What do I do if I see an otter?

A: This depends upon whether you see a live otter or a dead otter. If you live in Florida recording and communicating information about the river otters you see is very important to the purpose of this website. How to report your sightings is indicated below. This website is undertaking two river otter investigations in Florida and they are as follows:

(1) A population study of the river otters in south Florida. It is important for you to know what is considered, by this website, to be south Florida. South Florida is considered the area of Florida beginning at the most northerly point on Lake Okeechobee and extending west to the Gulf of Mexico and east to the Atlantic Ocean and south through the Florida Keys.

(2) A study to determine the locations and site conditions where otter roadway mortalities occur throughout the state of Florida.

How to Report Your Sightings: To report your sightings you will need to complete and submit a form providing information about you saw. To report a river otter sighting observed in south Florida click [Form.Report RO Sighting South FL](#) and to report a river otter roadway mortality sighting you observed anywhere in Florida click [Form.Report RO Roadway Mortality](#)

Q: Is it legal to hunt river otters?

A: It is not legal to hunt river otter in Florida. This author does not know whether it is legal to hunt river otter anywhere in North America.

Q: Is it legal to trap river otters?

A: Provided a person has the appropriate permit it is legal to trap river otter in Florida and many other states and provinces in North America.

Q: Can I see otters in zoos?

A: Yes. Call your local zoo or other zoos, which may be nearby, and ask them if they display river otters. Some aquariums in North America also display river otters.

Q: When do people think river otters are a nuisance?

A: It should be expected river otters are considered a nuisance primarily for two reasons. First, people will think river otters are nuisance when they discover the otters are eating the fish introduced into the ponds and lakes in their community for aquatic vegetation control. Secondly, otters would be considered a nuisance should an otter attempt to attack them or their pets.

Q: Is it true river otters will eat all the fish in a pond?

A: This would depend on several factors such as: (1) What species of fish are available, (2) the water levels of ponds and lakes in various seasons, (3) whether communities routinely stock their lakes or ponds with fish, (4) whether the otters can enter the communities through openings in community's perimeter barrier. The primary food source of river otters is fish and secondly, crayfish. The primary fish species caught and eaten by river otters are slow moving, bottom dwellers such as carp and the catfishes and bullheads. Sunfishes are eaten as is the closely related Largemouth bass, However, Largemouth bass has not been shown to be a significant prey species of the otter. This is attributable to the fact that Largemouth bass inhabit deeper water and must be fast swimmers (too fast for an otter) to feed on other fish species. When a lake or a pond is without a water source, other than rainfall, or lacks a means to drain it is considered self-contained. In south Florida, self-contained water bodies are common and when their water levels become low during the dry season the fish population in this body of water becomes concentrated and easily caught by river otters.

Q: Do river otters eat game fish?

A: The scientific literature does not indicate river otters eat game fish at any significant level and there have been many research studies to confirm this. However there have been notable sightings of river otters catching and eating pickerel. The Pickerel is a member of the pike family. The pike family also includes the Northern Pike and the Muskellunge and these two species are considered game fish.

Q: Why do fishermen think river otters eat game fish?

A: This author believes fishermen think otters eat game fish because someone told them they do. A person, while fishing for gamefish, probably saw an otter catch and eat a fish. That observer probably could not confirm which species of fish the otter was eating and assumed the fish was a game fish. This assumption may have been passed along through several generations and ultimately became considered a fact to some game fishermen.

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