



NORTH AMERICAN RIVER OTTER

CARNIVORA

Family: Mustelidae

Genus: *Lontra*

Species: *canadensis*



Range: North America except Gulf coast and no longer found in Indiana, Kansas, Nebraska, & the Dakotas

Habitat: Territories along fresh water can vary 320 ft wide to 1 to 30 miles in length.

Niche: Aquatic, carnivorous and nocturnal to diurnal when not disturbed.

Wild diet: Fish, crustaceans, frogs, clams, small rodents, worms and aquatic birds.

Zoo diet: Fish, horsemeat, vegetables and eggs

Life Span: (Wild) Unknown, (Captivity) ~ 23 years

Sexual dimorphism: M is larger than F

Location in SF Zoo: Otter exhibit near Lion house & penguin exhibit

APPEARANCE & PHYSICAL ADAPTATIONS:

The North American River Otter has a long, slender body and is adapted for an aquatic lifestyle. The water resistant pelage is shiny black or chestnut on the back while the belly is slightly lighter; there are two layers of dense fur to keep the otter warm. The nostrils and small ears can be closed when animal is in the water. Numerous stiff whiskers (vibrissae) around nose and snout and in tufts on the elbows are tactile hairs that are sensitive to water turbulence and are used in searching for prey. Long muscular tail and fingers and toes joined by membranes assist with swimming. Well developed pre-molars are used to crush shells and bones.

Weight: 20 - 32 lbs

Length: 26 - 42 in

TL: 12 - 22 in,
1/3 of total length

They swim by moving hind legs and tail. They are able to remain underwater for 6-8 minutes; can tread water, standing vertically so head, neck and breast are above water. They can swim on their back while beneath the water. When on land they can attain speeds up to 15 mph, but when conditions are right such as when traveling on ice, they use a combination of running and sliding.

STATUS & CONSERVATION

The river otter has become rare in many parts of its habitat. Trade in otter fur has declined due to in part the reduction in the number of animals and the outlawing of hunting. Otters have suffered severely through habitat destruction, pollution (that kills the fish they eat), misuse of pesticides and excessive trapping.

COMMUNICATION AND OTHER BEHAVIOR

Young peep in nest like chicks. Begging, alarm calls and adult mating calls sound like a soft whistle. When threatened they utter a hissing or yelp while challenge calls are deep nasal growls and piercing screams.

Otters engage in many playful-type activities such as chasing their own tail and sliding down slippery spots. They usually inhabit self-dug dens in shore shrubbery and tules with entrances several feet beneath the water's surface. Females are seen with their offspring whereas males can form groups of 2-17 individuals.

Scent is a main form of communication that can determine the sex, sexual status, receptivity of others and is used to determine territorial boundary as well as the last time the 'marker' was in the area. They have glands on the bottom of their feet that they use for scent marking.

COURTSHIP AND YOUNG

Males form dominance hierarchy with the highest ranking animal occupying the most favorable range. Females will not tolerate males when cubs are present except during the mating season. Delayed implantation is used to insure young are born in dens for maximum protection. Semi-altricial young open their eyes at one month then leave the den and begin to swim at 2 months of age.

Gestation: 63 days (with delayed implantation 9-11 mos)	Sexual Maturity: 2 - 3 years
# of Mammae:	Weaning Age: 3 - 4 months
# of Young: 1 - 5 but 2 - 3 is average	Weight at birth: 3.5 - 4.3 oz

MISCELLANEOUS

There are 13 otter species worldwide.

A group of otters in the water is called a raft.

Sources:

Updated: 11/94, 6/2007

Brainard, ed. 1985 / Burt & Grossenheider 1964 / Grzimek 1990 / MacDonald 1984 / Nowak 1991
<http://www.riverotterecology.org/>