

# Otters

Prepared by the National Wildlife Control Training Program. <http://WildlifeControlTraining.com>  
 Researched-based, certified wildlife control training programs to solve human – wildlife conflicts.  
 Your source for animal handling, control methods, and wildlife species information.



**Figure 1.** . River otters (*Lontra canadensis*). Photo by Jim Leopold of US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS).

## Species Overview

### Conflicts

River otters prey on fish and can foul boats with their excrement.

### Legal Status

The loss of ponds and other wetland habitat that resulted from the extirpation of beaver in the late 1800s may have adversely affected continental populations of river otters more than any other factor. Increases in the range and number of river otters in response to the return of beaver has been dramatic, particularly in the southeastern US. Releases totaling more than 1,000 otters have been made in Arizona, Colorado, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Missouri, Nebraska, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, and West Virginia in efforts to reestablish local populations.

In South Carolina, otters are legally classified as a furbearer and can be taken by

hunting or trapping during the open season. The season for trapping these animals is December 1 through March 1. Hunting season is Thanksgiving Day through March 1 on private lands with a valid hunting license. Anyone planning to trap otters should be familiar with the regulations which govern this activity. Information on these regulations can be obtained online at: <http://www.dnr.sc.gov>.

A nuisance otter can also be taken year-round with a **Depredation Permit**. A depredation permit is not required when controlling nuisance furbearers within 100 yards of a property owner's residence. This permit is issued by the S.C. Department of Natural Resources. To obtain a permit call your local wildlife management office or law enforcement field office.

For further information: <http://dnr.sc.gov>.

River otters are listed in Appendix II of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Flora and Fauna (CITES). The inclusion in this appendix subjects river otters to international restrictions and state and province export quotas because of their resemblance to European otters

### Identification

River otters (*Lontra canadensis*, Figure 1) are members of the weasel family, best known for their playful behavior, aesthetics, and value of their durable, high-quality fur.

### Physical Description

The river otter has a long, streamlined body, short legs, and a robust, tapered tail. The whiskers are prominent and located just behind and below the nose. The neck and shoulders are thick and muscular. Feet are webbed between the toes. The short, thick, soft fur is brown to almost black except on the chin, throat, cheeks, chest, and belly, where usually it is lighter.

Adult male otters reach an average length of 45 inches and weight of 25 pounds, but may reach 31 pounds. Sex is distinguished by the presence of a baculum (penile bone). Females have four mammae on the upper chest and are slightly smaller than males. Females measure about 36 inches and weigh 19 pounds. The average weights and sizes of river otters in southern latitudes tend to be lower than those in the north.

### Species Range

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River otters occur throughout North America except the arctic slopes, arid portions of the Southwest, and intensive agricultural and industrialized areas of the Midwest.

Populations of otters are confined to water courses, lakes, and wetlands, and therefore, population densities are lower than those of terrestrial species. Extirpation of otters from many areas is believed to be related to poisoning by pesticides that are bio-magnified in fish, their main source of food.

### Health and Safety Concerns

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River otters are susceptible to canine distemper and can contract parasites such as the giant kidney worm and *Toxoplasma gondii*. A study in California showed that 17% of otters tested positive for *T. gondii*.

### General Biology, Reproduction, and Behavior

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#### Reproduction

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Sexual maturity in otters occurs at about 2 years of age for both sexes. Occasionally, a yearling female will reproduce. The reproductive biology of river otters is complex because of delayed implantation. Otters mate between December and April and the fertilized eggs (blastocysts) exist in a free-floating state until the following winter or early spring. When the eggs implant in the spring, growth of the fetus takes 60 to 65 days, until kits are born between February and April. In the southern portion of the range, the dates of birth are earlier, which implies that implantation occurs in November and December. A female produces one litter each year and litters usually contain two to four kits. Only the female cares for the young; they usually remain together as a family group through the fall and winter. Young disperse in April to May at 12 to 13 months of age.

### Nesting/Denning Cover

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River otters select sites for denning based on availability and convenience. Otters use hollow logs, crevices formed from rocks, and abandoned lodges and bank dens of beavers and nutria (Figure 2) as dens. River otters have been found living in lodges with beavers. They frequent unused or abandoned human-made structures. Natal dens tend to be located on small waterways that lead to major drainages or lakes.



**Figure 2.** Entrance to the den of a river otter.  
Photo by Amy Williams.

## Behavior

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Otters have immense aesthetic and recreational value. Their morphology allows them to move through water with agility, grace, and speed. Seasonally, they may travel 50 to 60 miles along streams and lake shores and have home ranges up to 60 square miles. Males may travel up to 10 miles in a single night.

River otters are nocturnal but frequently are active during the day in undisturbed areas. The basic social group is a female and her offspring. Otters spend much of their time feeding and playing in groups, repeatedly sliding down steep banks of mud or snow. River otters are active year round. Otters tend to reduce their daily movements during winter months, often by 50%.

## Habitat

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River otters always are associated with water (fresh, brackish, and salt water), although they may travel overland for considerable distances. They occur at much higher densities in the Great Lakes region, brackish marshes and inlets, and other coastal habitats than inland. In colder climates, otters frequent rapids, waterfalls, and other areas that remain free of ice. Vegetative cover and altitude do not appear to influence distribution as much as water quality, availability of fish, and suitable sites for denning.

## Food Habits

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A river otter eats about 2½ pounds of food per day, including several species of fresh and anadromous (migrate from salt water to spawn in fresh water) fishes and crayfish. When given the opportunity, otters prey on amphibians, reptiles, and crustaceans. Consumption of game fish in comparison to non-game rough fish generally is proportional to the difficulty or ease with which the fish can be caught. The loss of warm-water sport fish due to otters is believed

to be minor compared to the losses river otters can inflict on species of fish in cold water, such as trout and salmon. Warm water provides an abundance of alternate prey species.

## Voice, Sounds, Tracks, and Signs

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Vocalizations include a snarling growl or hissing bark when disturbed, loud piercing screams when injured, low grunts when playing or traveling, and a loud snort through the nose when alarmed. A chirp is not as frequent as low-frequency chuckles uttered when otters are in groups.

## Damage Identification

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### Damage to Landscapes

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Otters rarely damage gardens and landscapes.

### Damage to Crops and Livestock

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The presence of river otters in or around a fish hatchery, aquaculture, or facility for fish culture is a good indication that a problem is imminent. Slow-moving channel catfish are more vulnerable to predation by otters than other fish.

Scats or toilets of otters that contain scales, exoskeletons, and other parts of the species being farmed are evidence that damage is ongoing. Parts of fish found in shallow water and along the shore are evidence that fish are being taken. Otters occasionally cause damage to populations of fish in marine aquaculture facilities.

Otters can represent a threat to pets in parks when they occupy ponds that have been stocked in urban locations. Otters can kill small domestic dogs.

### Damage to Structures

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Otters damage boats by tearing covers and contaminate areas through defecation.

## Damage Prevention and Control Methods

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### Habitat Modification

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No practical habitat modification has been found that effectively controls otters.

### Exclusion

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Fences with 3- x 3-inch or smaller mesh wire can be an economically effective method of preventing damage at sites that are relatively small, or where fish or aquaculture activities are concentrated. Hog wire-type fences also have been used effectively, but these should be checked occasionally to ensure that the lower meshes have not been spread apart or raised to allow otters to enter.

Electric fences also can be used as a supplement to barrier fences along the perimeter of an aquaculture facility. Use at least four strands that are separated by 4 to 5 inches, with the lowest strand 4 inches aboveground. Electric fences usually are impractical for protecting individual ponds, raceways, or tanks on their own.

### Frightening Devices

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No frightening devices are effective for the control of otters.

### Repellents

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None are available for the control of otters.

### Toxicants

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No toxicants are registered for the control of otters.

### Shooting

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Legal hunting season on private lands in South Carolina for otters is Thanksgiving Day through March 1. A free depredation permit for nuisance otters may be issued to landowners who do not possess a hunting license. Go to [www.dnr.sc.gov](http://www.dnr.sc.gov) for additional information.

Shooting of offending otters usually will prevent continued losses. Otters are inquisitive and often swim within close range for a small rifle or shotgun. Use extreme caution to avoid ricochet when shooting a rifle (.22-caliber) at objects surrounded by water. Shotguns (12-gauge) also may be used and have lower risks from ricochet.

Otters may be hunted at night; however, they may not be hunted with artificial lights except when treed or cornered with dogs and no buckshot or any shot larger than #4, or any rifle ammunition larger than a twenty-two rimfire may be used. Devices that amplify light using any type of power source are considered artificial light (including night vision or thermal imaging equipment).

### Trapping

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In South Carolina, the legal trapping season is December 1 – March 1 for licensed trappers, however a private landowner may apply for a free depredation permit outside of the regular trapping season or if they do not have a trapping license. Permits can be obtained from any South Carolina DNR office or conservation officer.

Furbearer Trapping regulations can be obtained online at [www.dnr.sc.gov](http://www.dnr.sc.gov).

Trapping is the most common way otters are managed. Cage traps (12- x 12- x 48-inches), 220- and 330-sized conibear-style traps, and padded-jaw (No. 1½) or the No. 11 double-longspring traps are effective in capturing river otters. Obtain training on the use of these traps before trapping to ensure your safety and that the equipment is used responsibly.

## Disposition

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### Relocation

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Relocation of nuisance river otters is not permitted.

### Translocation

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River otters can travel great distances, so translocation is not permitted.

### Euthanasia

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River otters may be euthanized with carbon dioxide. For euthanasia by shooting, draw an imaginary line between the left eye and right ear and another between the right eye and left ear. Place a .22-caliber bullet at the intersection.

## Resources

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Government or private agencies, universities, extension service.

### Web Resources

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<http://dnr.sc.gov>

<http://wildlifecontroltraining.com>

<http://icwdm.org/>

<http://wildlifecontrol.info>

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