

River Otters – nature’s playful creatures

One of the most enjoyable animals to see in nature is undoubtedly the River Otter. Their playful antics are fun to watch and it would seem that they certainly know how to enjoy life. Otters play more than most wild animals -- wrestling, chasing other otters, tossing and diving for rocks and clamshells, toying with live prey and occasionally, sliding. But in addition to being cute and playful, they are very interesting animals.

The river otter, found in the United States and Canadian waterways, is a sub-species of the Otter (Lutrinae). They belong to the martens (Mustelidae) family which includes weasels, polecats and badgers. The word otter comes from the Old English word otor or oter, which basically means water. Their den is called a holt or couch. The male is a dog and the female a bitch, while the babies are called whelps or pups. A group of otters is called a bevy, family, lodge or romp. Mother otters are devoted to their young and teach them to swim and forage. The young otters stay with mom until they are about a year old when they venture out on their own.

River otters are three to four feet long and weigh 15 to 25 pounds. They live up to 25 years in captivity and about 15 years in the wild. Their colorful coats range from nearly black to reddish or grayish brown on their backs. The belly is silvery or grayish brown. The throat and cheeks are silvery to yellowish gray. The velvety thick fur is the most durable North American fur and has been in demand ever since Europeans came to this continent.

They are semi-aquatic creatures that feed mostly on aquatic animals such as fish and shellfish. They live in most areas of the world! The only continents where otters do not live are Australia and Antarctica. They generally make their homes beside the water’s edge.

Otters have long, sleek bodies with short limbs and webbed paws. Their feet sport sharp claws and they have long, muscular tails. Their fur is very soft and has a layer of underfur. This layer is protected by the outer coating of hair and it traps layers of air which keeps them dry and warm when under the water. Otters have a high metabolic rate which also helps keep them warm. They usually hunt for 3 to 5 hours a day and eat as much as 25% of their body weight per day.

Swimming at an average speed of 7 miles per hour, otters are stealth-like and make hardly a splash or ripple. They can stay under water for up to 2 minutes and are also excellent divers. They are built for the water. Their diamond shaped noses have a valve-like skin that closes and keeps the water out. They also communicate with their noses by smelling marked territories. When they do speak to one another it is usually with chirps, chuckles, grunts, whistles and screams.

River otters are active all year and are usually most lively from early evening through early morning. They are fast in the water but they are even faster on land and can run up to 15-18 mph. Adult otters don’t have many natural enemies, especially while in the water. However, juvenile otters are vulnerable to predators such as the fox, wolf and raptors. Unfortunately, most otter deaths are caused by humans.

Otters were once found all over North America. When the Europeans settled here and started to clear the land for development, the otter's habitat began to diminish. The use of pesticides and fertilizers has also contributed to the decline of the otter. Since otters are at the top of the food chain, if their prey has been exposed to chemicals, they are affected. By the early 1980's, 11 states reported no otter population and 13 states reported very few otter populations. River otters require a large amount of space. Throughout a year, an otter may occupy 50 or more miles of a stream.

There are several ways you can help save these playful, energetic creatures. Support environmental conservation. Don't overuse pesticides, herbicides and other chemicals that can cause harm to the environment. Don't buy fur or pelts and ensure that protective measures are built in when roads or other development is constructed near otter populations.