



Klamath Network Featured Creature

August 2011

North American River Otter (*Lontra canadensis*)

FIELD NOTES:

General Description:

As members of the weasel family, Otters are semi-aquatic mammal with a long, streamlined body, thick tapered tail, short legs, and webbed feet. An adult can weigh 10-30 lbs. and has a body length of 25-45 inches with the males being slightly larger than the females. They are protected and insulated by a thick, water repellent coat of fur which is made up of short guard hairs that are very densely packed (~89,500/in² in the middle of their backs). They have short, inconspicuous ears, a neck similar in diameter and length as the head, and a broad muzzle on a relatively flat skull. This body design, along with the ability of the river otter to close their nostrils and ears during submersion allows them to be excellent swimmers.

Reproduction and Development:

Northern River Otters are polygynous. Males and females are usually sexually mature at two years of age but females are more likely to produce young as they get older. The reason being, the number of corpora lutea, a temporary endocrine structure in mammals, increases with age. The corpora lutea is essential for establishing and maintaining pregnancy in females. While true gestation lasts ~60 days, the river otter implements a strategy called delayed implantation to help ensure survival of the young so it can take 10-12 months from the time of conception before the young is born. River otters usually occupy dens constructed by other animals (e.g. beaver) to provide protection while raising young. On average, litter size consists of 1-3 pups but they can have as many as 5 which are born fully furred, blind, and toothless. Mothers take the responsibility for raising the young who can be seen splashing around in the water when they are about 2 months old. This species can live up to 13 years in the wild and up to 25 years in captivity.



Photo by Sean Mohren, NPS



<http://www.nps.gov/yell/forkids/r.htm>

Diet:

River otters can remain underwater for nearly four minutes, can swim at speeds approaching 11 km/h, and can dive up to 20 meters all of which helps them capture and scrounge for a variety of food types. A typical river otter diet is mainly composed of fish and/or crustaceans; however they will also consume fruits, reptiles, amphibians, birds, aquatic insects, small mammals, and mollusks.

More Information:

Verts, B. J., and L. N. Carraway. 1998. Land mammals of Oregon. University of California Press. Berkeley, CA.

IUCN 2010. IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. Version 2010.4. <http://www.iucnredlist.org>. Downloaded on 24 May 2011.

Habitat:

The river otter can be found in a variety of freshwater and coastal marine habitats beyond rivers including lakes, wetlands, coastal shorelines, marshes, and estuaries. Elevation and temperature do not seem to affect where a river otter is located and given a healthy supply of food and access to a body of water with limited pollution an area is likely to be able to support river otters. In addition, the otter needs a den which is usually constructed by wood chunks, red fox, nutria, beaver, or muskrats. They can also use hollow trees or logs, undercut banks, rock formations, and flood debris.

Geographic Range:

In the USA, this species is present throughout Alaska, in states bordering the Great Lakes, Atlantic Ocean and Gulf of Mexico, and in the forested regions of the Pacific coast in North America. Once found throughout most of the major drainages in the United States, historic trapping, urbanization and pollution have significantly reduced their populations. The species is now considered rare or absent in many of the central states such as Arizona, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Nebraska, New Mexico, North and South Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Tennessee, and West Virginia. However, reintroduction efforts have expanded the distribution of this species in recent years.

Where to See It in the Klamath Parks:

This species can be seen splashing around the aquatic habitats of Lassen Volcanic NP, Redwood NSP, and Whiskeytown NRA.