

River Otter



Overview:

River otters were historically distributed throughout much of North America, excluding the frozen Arctic and the Southwest. Otters are native to Ohio, but were extirpated by the early 1900s. In 1986, the Ohio Division of Wildlife began a seven-year project to reintroduce the species to the state. Over this period, 123 otters were captured in Arkansas and Louisiana using modern foothold traps and were released in the Grand River, Killbuck Creek, Little Muskingum River, and Stillwater Creek. Since then, river otters have been sighted in nearly two-thirds of Ohio's counties and young otters or family groups have been seen throughout eastern Ohio.

Otters are highly adapted for swimming, possessing a long, tapered body with sleek, short, dense fur. Its small head widens to the neck and shoulders. There are long, stiff and highly sensitive facial whiskers behind and below the nose that aid the otter in finding and capturing prey. Their teeth are like those of other carnivores-- adapted for grasping, grinding, shearing, and crushing. Their large feet are completely webbed. The tail is flattened and is well muscled; the tail is important in the animal's swimming ability and makes up about 50 percent of its total body length. Maximum length is reached at three to four years of age. Adult weight ranges from 11 to 33 pounds.

Breeding occurs in early spring following the birth of a litter. Newborn pups are silky black, blind, toothless, and helpless. They grow rapidly and emerge from the den at two months of age. Young eat solid food at this age as well; however, they are not weaned until they are three months old. Litters are cared for by the female otter.

Young otters are self-sufficient by the time they are five to six months, but the family group remains intact for at

least seven or eight months or until just prior to the birth of a new litter. Yearling otters can disperse up to 20 miles or more from where they were reared.

Otters live in aquatic habitats--rivers, lakes, and marshes. Otters can live in both marine and freshwater environments. They prefer tributaries of major, unpolluted drainages where there is minimal human disturbance. Log jams and submerged trees provide resting and feeding habitat. They typically eat fish, aquatic insects, crayfish, snakes, frogs, and, to a lesser extent, waterfowl and mammals. Often dens are in abandoned beaver lodges and bank dens.

Otters are generally nocturnal (active at night) or crepuscular (active at dawn or dusk), although diurnal (daytime) activity is not uncommon in undisturbed areas. River otters are often seen in family groups in the summer and early fall.