

Wildlife Express

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North American

River Otter

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North American River Otter

River Otter Tracks

Photo: CC-BY Knut Tondson at Flickr.com

Do you like to sled in the winter? So do river otters! They are often seen sliding across the snow or down snow-covered riverbanks. Do otters slide for fun? They do appear to enjoy themselves and make chuckling sounds like laughter. One thing is certain; sliding on the snow is a great way for river otters to get around. With their toboggan-shaped bodies and oily fur, river otters may reach speeds of over 15 miles-per-hour!

North American river otters are found throughout Idaho. They may have the word river in

their name, but they are found in other watery places. River otters are also found around lakes, ponds, small streams, marshes, and wetlands.

Although they hunt in water, much of their time is spent on land. An animal that spends time in water and on land is called semiaquatic.

River otters love to eat fish. They will eat trout, but tend to catch fish that are not as fast and agile. River otters will also eat crayfish, frogs, birds, and small mammals. They are opportunistic, eating just about anything



Photo: CC-BY Idaho Fish and Game

they can catch. They have strong jaws and perfect teeth for their carnivorous ways. Long canine teeth deliver a killing blow, while strong molars crush through bones and crayfish shells. Their bottom canines even bend backwards a bit. It's believed this is to help otters hold onto slippery fish and keep them from escaping.

A group of river otters is called a romp. Otters in the water are sometimes called a raft. Most otter groups consist of mothers with their young, but sometimes immature males will form groups. It is easy to see why a group of otters is called a romp; otters are playful. They like to slide down snow or mud-covered riverbanks, wrestle, and chase each other through the water. River otters may look like they are just having fun, but their play does have a purpose. Play develops coordination and the skills for survival. Through play, otters learn how to be great hunters and learn how to protect themselves from danger.

If you see a larger otter with smaller otters, you are looking at a mother and her babies. An abandoned animal burrow, hollow log or big log jam is a nice place to give birth and raise a family. Baby river otters are called pups. Pups

are helpless, blind, and toothless when born. They weigh about five ounces at birth, or about as much as 24 unsharpened pencils. When they are one month old, their eyes open. Pups venture out of the den when they are about two months old. This is also when they get their first taste of solid food and an introduction to water. River otters naturally know how to swim, but unfamiliar things can be frightening. Mothers usually need to coax the pups into the water or give them a little shove. Pups drink mother's milk until about five months old and stay with mom for about one year.

There are not many animals that can catch a river otter in the water. Coyotes, bobcats or larger predators might catch an otter on land. If a river otter can avoid predators and other dangers, it may live to be eight to ten years old and weight between 10 to 30 pounds.

River otters are very curious animals. If you happen to see one, look quickly. River otters may stand up briefly to get a better look at you. They may even give you a quick bark or grunt, but they will soon be back on their way, romping through the water.

River Otters enjoying a cutthroat trout: CC-BY Juilie Lublick at Flickr.com



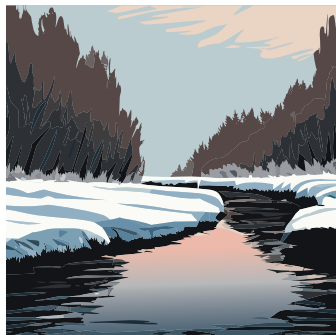
Adaptations for Watery Adventures



Have you ever seen a video of a river otter swimming or been lucky enough to see one in the wild? If you have, you may have noticed how comfortable they are in the water. They turn, twist, and glide through the water with ease. Otters have some amazing adaptations. An adaptation is a special feature that helps an animal survive in its habitat. Let's look at the adaptations of river otters.

One thing that helps river otters while swimming is their long, thin bodies. River otters' bodies are shaped like hotdogs! They also have small ears that are close to their heads. This shape helps otters slip through the water without much resistance. If otters were shaped like hamburgers and had floppy ears like elephants, the body and ears would catch water. This would make it difficult to move quickly through the water.

River otters' legs and feet are made for swimming and catching prey. Otter's legs are short and located at the front and back of the body for maximum pushing power. Four webbed feet scoop water while short, curved claws help to grasp fish and other animals. River otters use abandoned burrows for their dens, because their feet and claws are not made for digging. Animals that dig burrows usually have longer toes and long claws.



Otters also have built-in rudders. A rudder is the triangular flap on a boat's motor that controls the boat's direction. To turn left the rudder points to the right, and to turn right, it point to the left. This is how river otters' tails work.

Any scuba diver would be jealous of the protective gear found on river otters. River otters have one of the warmest scuba suits in nature, their fur. One square inch of river otter fur has between 100,000 and 450,000 hairs! Fur has two layers. The top layer is made of guard hairs. Guard hairs do just what their name says. They guard and protect the bottom layer and skin from weather and water. They are covered in oil. The second layer of fur is called underfur. This layer is short, soft and fluffy. It keeps the otter warm by trapping air close to the body. Water has a difficult time passing over the oil and through all those hairs, so otters stay dry and warm. River otters even have built-in swim goggles and nose and ear plugs. They can close their noses and ears to keep water out. Clear eyelids, called nictitating membranes, come across their eyes when underwater.

With these special adaptations, river otters can dive over 30 feet down in the water and stay underwater for up to eight minutes!

Wonderful Whiskers

River otters sometimes hunt in water that is cloudy and difficult to see through. To help them find prey and avoid objects in the water, river otters use their whiskers. Whiskers are not only found around river otters' noses and mouths. They are also found above the eyes and on the neck. All these sensitive whiskers help river otters feel vibrations. Other animals depend on whiskers, too.

Whiskers are great tools for animals that hunt in places where it is difficult to see or that hunt at night. Whiskers are special hairs that are very sensitive to touch and movement. All mammals, except humans, have whiskers. Although men's beards are called whiskers, they are just body hairs. Animal whiskers are different than the whiskers on a man's beard.

Whiskers are called vibrissae (vibrissae). They are thicker and rooted deeper in the skin than regular hairs. Each whisker sits in a sack of fluid filled with nerves. Whiskers can turn in the fluid like a straw in a bottle. When a whisker moves from vibrations or from being touched, the information goes down the hair to the nerves. The nerves tell the brain what the whiskers have felt.

Whiskers may grow in interesting places on animals. Cats, foxes and squirrels have whiskers on their ankles. Some bats have them on their rumps, and underground burrowers, like moles, have

whiskers behind their ears and on their tails and front feet. Flying squirrels use whiskers on their heads, feet and legs to help them find their way through trees at night.

Sometimes animals use whiskers to greet. When two rats meet, they rub their whiskers over each other. This helps them to identify the other rat.

Mammals would have a difficult time getting around and catching food without their whiskers. Whiskers help animals stay in touch with their environment.





The Weasel Family

Members of the weasel family are called mustelids (mus-TELL-ids). In Latin, “mustela” means weasel. This group of animals includes wolverine, badger, fisher, weasel, marten, mink, and otter. In Idaho, we have eight species of mustelids.

Mustelids are found on every continent except Antarctica and Australia. They range in size from the sea otter that can weigh as much as a third grader to the least weasel which weighs about as much as two pinkie erasers. Wolverines are the largest mustelid in Idaho; they usually weigh between 20 to 40 pounds. American ermines or short-tailed weasels are the smallest. They are eight to 14 inches long and weigh about as much as a bottle of Elmer’s glue.

Most mustelids have long, slender bodies and short legs. They can fit easily into tight spaces or move freely through the water. Even the bulky-looking badger and wolverine are amazingly flexible and quick. Several species, including marten and fisher, are excellent climbers. Otter and mink are wonderful swimmers and spend a lot of time in the water.

The long, thin shape of mustelids makes it difficult to stay warm and store fat, so they eat a lot. Mustelids are mainly carnivores. They eat other animals, but they may also eat fruits, berries or plants. When a mustelid kills more than it can eat in one sitting, it saves the rest for another meal. The leftovers are hidden in a place called a cache (cash). When the animal is hungry, it will return to the cache and finish eating its prey.

All members of the weasel family have something in common. They stink! Mustelids have glands located at the base of the tail that make musk. Musk is a strongly scented liquid. Musk may be used to attract a mate or to mark their homes or territories. The smell tells other members of the same species to stay out! Some mustelids mark their caches with musk. By doing this, they are warning others to stay away from their food. The smell also helps them locate the cache later.

Keep an eye out for mustelids while enjoying Idaho’s wildlands. These active, curious and strong creatures can be very entertaining to watch!

Furbearers and Trapping in Idaho

Furbearers are special animals. Furbearers are animals that are trapped or hunted for their fur. Their fur is valuable to people. Furbearers do not only supply people with fur. They also are fun to watch, interesting to study, and connect people with their historic past.

There are 19 animals living in Idaho whose fur is or has been used by people. In Idaho, some of these animals are considered furbearers but not all. Furbearers are badger, beaver, bobcat, marten, mink, muskrat, river otter, red fox, lynx and fisher. No trapping or hunting is allowed for lynx or fisher. They are protected because their numbers are so low. Badger, bobcat and red fox are the only furbearers that may be hunted and trapped. Coyote, ermine, long-tailed weasel, raccoon, striped skunk, and spotted skunk also have beautiful fur. These animals are considered

predatory animals not furbearers. They have their own rules. Gray wolves are big game animals, and wolverine are protected nongame animals.

Why do people trap animals? Trapping is a great way to enjoy beautiful winter weather and wildlife. It is also a way some people provide their families with extra money. Trapping furbearers is a tool to manage animals. Trapping may be used when there are too many animals in an area. Too many animals in an area may spread diseases or damage farmers' crops and habitats. Biologists trap animals to learn about them. These animals are trapped, studied, and released alive. Sometimes animals are also trapped and moved to areas where their numbers are low to help their populations grow.

Photo: CC-BY Conner Liess at Idaho Fish and Game





There are many rules that people must follow when trapping. These laws protect people and animals. People who want to trap must take a trapper education class and buy a trapping license. If a trapper purchased her first trapping license before June 30, 2011, she does not need to take the trapper education class.

Even a trapper with lots of experience can learn from a trapper education class. The class teaches how to be a safe and responsible trapper. Tools, techniques and where to put traps will be covered. You will learn about animal behavior, what equipment works best for an animal and situation, and how to care for pelts. You will also learn about the rules that need to be followed. There has been lots of research on the best methods to trap. This research has provided information on safe, effective and humane trapping methods.

River otters are one of the most regulated furbearers in Idaho. At this time, only 160 otters may be harvested statewide. Each trapper and Fish and Game region has a limit. When a limit is reached, the region is closed for the year. If a trapper catches an otter, she must take the otter pelt to Fish and Game within 72 hours to have the pelt inspected and to get a tag. Otter pelts cannot be sold or purchased legally without a tag.

Fish and Game wants to make sure people can always trap furbearers. With responsible trappers and proper management, Idaho will have furbearers for everyone to enjoy for years to come.



Furbearers in Idaho History

Furbearers have played an important role in Idaho history. Native Americans have always depended on nature. Plants and animals once supplied all the food, clothing and materials they needed. Furbearer pelts were used for many things, not just clothing. The long pelt of a river otter makes a great quiver. A quiver is a case to hold arrows.

Furbearers are the reason European people first came to this area. In the early 1800s, fur was used to make coats, hats, gloves and other pieces of clothing. River otters were trapped during this time for their warm, dense fur. They played an important part in the fur trade, but when people talk about the early fur trade, they usually talk about beavers.

Beaver trapping had a huge impact on Idaho history. As beavers became harder to find in the eastern United States and Canada, trappers moved westward. This brought trappers to what we now call Idaho. In 1809, David Thompson built Kullyspell House by Lake Pend Oreille. This was the first European building constructed in Idaho. The house was built by the Northwest Fur Company. Soon other trappers heard about all the beavers in the area. By 1811, four fur companies were trapping beavers and other animals in Idaho. Mountain men that were not members of fur companies were also trapping animals.





Idaho was seen as a land of plentiful resources. Many people wanted and competed for the land. The United States and Great Britain signed a treaty in 1818 that let people from both countries live on the land. Neither country owned the land, but both countries wanted to own it. Great Britain operated The Hudson's Bay Fur Company. They wanted to create a "fur desert" to keep the Americans out of the area and claim the land for Great Britain. They thought that if they trapped and removed all the beavers and other furbearers, no Americans would want to live here. Between 1818 and 1827, they trapped 85,000 beavers out of the Snake River alone! Now that is a lot of beavers. Trapping so many animals didn't keep Americans out of the area. Russia gave the Northwest Territory, which included Idaho, to the United States in 1824.

Pioneers and homesteaders also trapped animals. Trapping was one way to feed a family and earn money. Over time,

beavers, otters, and other animals were becoming harder to find. Some people thought they needed protection. In 1899, a law was passed that protected beavers from being trapped or hunted in Idaho. The law helped, and beavers became more common. In 1957, people were once again allowed to trap beavers.

River otters were also affected by unregulated trapping and habitat destruction. By the early 1900s, otters were gone or nearly gone from 20 of the lower 48 states. Otters are naturally found in lower numbers than other furbearers, and they don't recover as quickly when overharvested. In the early 1970s, Idaho closed otter trapping and didn't allow trapping again until 2000.

Now, trapping is regulated. Beavers, river otters and other furbearers will continue to make an impact on Idaho's history.

Wildlife Gifts



During the holiday season, our thoughts are about the things that are closest to us – our family and friends. We think about what gifts we can give them to show we care. If you were to add wildlife to your gift-giving list, what might you give?

Habitat is the most pressing need for wild animals. A good habitat will provide food, water, shelter and space. These things must be arranged so the animal doesn't have to travel too far to find them. What could you do to improve wildlife habitat around your home?

During the winter, many people like to feed birds. Here are some fun ideas to try. Make a garland of air-popped popcorn, fresh cranberries and orange or apple slices. You can also make a bird feeder using pinecones. Coat the pinecones with almond butter or peanut butter and roll the pinecones in bird seed. Tie yarn around the pinecone for a hanger. To make seed baskets, cut grapefruits or oranges in half and scoop out the pulp. Poke holes in each side of the hollowed-out fruits and string yarn through the holes to make a handle. Fill the baskets with black oil sunflower seeds or other bird seeds. You can even make suet. Woodpeckers, nuthatches and jays love to eat suet. Below is a recipe to try. Hang your gifts outside on a tree and enjoy watching the birds this winter!

Suet

3 lb. can of shortening
2 cups peanut butter
or other nut butter
2, 24 oz. boxes corn meal

Optional Ingredients:
2-3 lbs. sunflower hearts
2 ½ lbs. cracked corn
or bird seed
1 lb. raisins or currants
flour

Melt the shortening and peanut butter together and stir in the other ingredients. Add flour to thicken if necessary. Pack into old suet packaging containers or small paper cups. If using paper cups, make a hanger from a piece of yarn. Cut the yarn into pieces 6-8 inches long. Make a loop with the yarn and push the ends of yarn into the suet filled cup using a spoon. Make sure the suet is packed tightly around the ends of the string. Store the suet in the refrigerator. When ready to use, peel the paper cup from the suet or turn the suet out into a suet hanger.



Color Me!



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WE WOULD LIKE TO HEAR FROM YOU!

If you have a letter, poem or question for Wildlife Express, it may be included in a future issue!

Send it to: adare.evans@idfg.idaho.gov

or

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