

# NATURE DETECTIVES



Winter 2019

## River Otters Inhabit Local Waters

The river otter pups were seven months old now, and this chilly morning was the first time they saw cold, white stuff on the ground. Snow! They quickly discovered they could slide on their bellies on snow just like they slid on mud. It was much easier and faster to slide than to run on their short legs. The girl pup slid down the river bank into the stream, and the two boy pups quickly followed. It was fun!

The pups climbed out of the water and ran back up the river bank. Their dark chocolate brown fur glistened with water drops. One by one they slid down the snowy slope into the current. The cold snow and chilly water didn't bother them in their thick, water-resistant fur coats. They tobogganed down the bank for a few runs before turning to the important business of learning to catch a fish or dig up a dozing turtle for breakfast.

## Welcome River Otters!

River otters like these pups are starting to show up in ponds along the St. Vrain Creek, and a few have been spotted in Boulder Creek. For a long time, there were no river otters *anywhere* in Colorado.

Over a century ago, Colorado otters had vanished, mostly because of unlimited trapping. Luxurious, thick fur made otter skins worth lots of money. But caring people in our state in the 1970's decided, "[We have the water, let's get the otters.](#)" During a period of fifteen years, wildlife officials brought more than a hundred otters from other states, and those otters liked it here just fine.

## Scarce and Still Threatened

Young otters gradually began ranging to new places. Most otters live west of the Rockies, but some are making their homes in rivers and ponds in Boulder County. Their scarcity keeps them listed as a Threatened Species in Colorado. Colorado Parks and Wildlife wants to know if you catch sight of one.

CPW is really happy if you can send them your photo of a local river otter.



## The Best Water for Otters

Wetlands where beavers live (or used to live) are the most likely places to find river otters. The rivers, streams, ponds, and marshes must be pollution-free, deeply flowing year-round, and full of the prey that river otters eat. Otters prefer habitat with jumbles of logs in the water and lush vegetation on the banks. Tall trees to shade the water are important too.

Otters often repurpose old beaver or muskrat dens by cleaning and widening them. The entrance tunnel is under water for safety from predators, but the living room is in the riverbank above the water line, dry and warm. Females use grasses and other vegetation to make a cozy bed for themselves and their pups.

## Pups Grow Up

Usually a mother otter will give birth to two or three babies in March or April. They are born with fur but no teeth, and their eyes don't open for five weeks. For the first couple months, they stay in the den and drink mom's milk. After emerging from the den, they taste solid food and start exploring the water. Pups are natural swimmers, but their mom has to encourage them into deep water at first. She will carry a reluctant pup to the water in her mouth.

Otters may live alone or in small groups of yearlings and pups led by their mom. Once the pups are out of the den, their dad might join the family to assist in showing them how to catch prey. Other adults may be part of the group at times. In good habitat river otters can survive 14 years or more.



Otters communicate with each other through scent, calls and whistles, touching and body language. They leave scent marks with urine and by rubbing rocks, logs, and other surfaces with stinky musk from glands near the base of their tail.

## Play Promotes Learning

Pups play tag and hide-and-peek. They wrestle with their siblings. Such activity helps them develop their muscles and learn skills they will use to catch prey. It also strengthens family bonds.

Young otters like to slide on their bellies, often pulling themselves along with their front paws. Sliding on mud, ice or snow is an easy way to travel on land. Sliding also helps otters slip into the water quietly when hunting for prey.

Otters have been observed playing with objects such as a pebble, dead fish or old bone. They use their paws in a similar way to hold their food steady while they chew. Otters of all ages seem to frolic in the water at times for pure enjoyment.

## Amazing Aquatic Acrobats

Watch an otter run, and their humped-back posture makes clear they are in the weasel family. Like weasels, otters are long and lean with short legs that result in that weasel posture when traveling on land. Water is where they excel, and they are considered semi-aquatic for the amount of time spent there year round. Otters are the fastest fresh-water mammal in pond or stream with the ability to twist, turn, swim forward or backward, float, and dive with amazing flexibility.

Flaps of skin keep water from their nose and small ears, and transparent extra eyelids aid underwater vision. They propel their streamlined body through the water by undulating body and tail. The muscular tail is tapered from a thick base and is also used for balance on land and steering in the water. They can “dog-paddle” with their front paws, or thrust against the water with back paws stretched behind them for real speed. They can stay submerged for four minutes or longer. Their eyes are near the top of their head so they can see well when they surface.

## Lively Otters Snack Often

Otters need a lot of nutrients to fuel their active lifestyle. They eat a variety of foods from the water, but their main source of calories is fish. They mostly catch slow-moving sucker fish and cat fish.

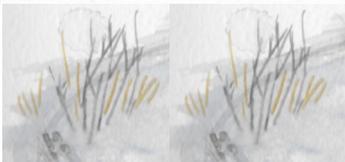
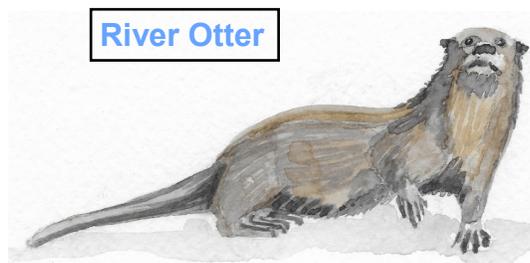
Crayfish and insects are a tasty addition to their fish menu. They sometimes eat frogs, salamanders, snakes, mussels and water plants. Turtles are another prey item. More rarely, they will eat birds and small mammals.

## Mistaken Identity in River Otter Habitat

Dark-furred muskrats, minks, and beavers are sometimes mistaken for otters, especially if the critter is in the water at a distance. If the animal is on land or up close, there is no comparison. The four mammals differ greatly in size, body shape and tail type.

Muskrats and beavers are plant eaters with similar lifestyles, but muskrats are much smaller with narrow, rat-like tails. Beavers have larger, fuller bodies and wide flat tails. Beavers have big, tree-cutting front teeth.

Minks are half the size of otters with thinner tails. Minks are black with white patches under their chins. Otters have a tapering, thick tail. The otter’s chocolaty, sleek, three-to-four-foot body has a light gray underside.



## Looking for Signs of River Otters in Winter

The tracks of land predators often wander, circling around trees and bushes as they hunt for food. Otters mainly search for prey while swimming so *their* paw tracks tend to go in a straight line. When otters are out of the water, they are just traveling directly from place to place. The otter's five-toed foot prints are two inches or bigger. The webbing between their toes is sometimes visible in the tracks, especially in the back feet tracks.



Near water, look for six to ten-inch-wide slide marks on snow, ice or mud followed by tracks where the otters loped for a bit. Sometimes there is a line between the tracks where the otter's heavy tail marked the snow.

From a river or stream bank, scan for tracks where there is a hole in the ice. Also look on the bank for slides on mud, grass or snow where otters entered the water.

## Sensing Things in the Dark

River otters use their long, sensitive whiskers to identify prey and other things in dark or cloudy water. They also use their webbed front paws to grasp things. How do you feel your way in a dark room?

Gather a few common objects, and test a friend or family member's ability to identify them in the dark. You could use a blindfold, trust them to keep their eyes closed, or put the objects in a paper bag.

## Keeping Warm



One way mammals keep warm is with hair or fur. Humans don't have much hair. Can you think of ways people keep warm in cold water or in cold air?

River otters have up to 850,000 hairs per square inch on their skin. Their underfur is dense, with air between the hairs for added insulation. People often wear clothes in layers in winter, with lighter coats or sweaters covered by larger coats. How does this relate to the way an otter's fur works?

Outer guard hairs on an otter are oily, providing water resistance to help keep the underfur dry.

**Try this:** Get two small pieces of fabric (if your mom or dad sews, they can get this for you). Spread a little cooking oil on one piece of fabric. Dip both pieces quickly into a bowl of water and lift out to examine. Which piece of fabric has less water?



Text by Katherine Young and Deborah Price  
Illustrations by Carol Tuttle