



## The North American River Otter (*Lontra canadensis*)

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Illustrated by Lizabeth West

The North American River Otter is probably the most numerous of 13 otter species. Found in or near rivers and wetlands throughout

North America, river otters are powerful and graceful swimmers known for their playfulness. They were found once from Alaska to Florida. Native Americans hunted otters largely for their dense fur which enabled them to keep warm. European settlers also hunted them for fur and developed the land, cutting down forests and habitats. By the 1980s, eleven states reported no otter population and thirteen other states reported scarce numbers.

Inhabiting five of the continents of the world, the otter is the only marine mammal to have fur instead of blubber. Otters are very smart; it is one of a handful of tool-using mammals. Sea Otters use rocks to pry abalones off rocks and to break open shells.

River otters grow to 35 pounds and 4 feet long. They have special adaptations to help them swim underwater, including ears and eyes that close to seal out the water, webbed feet and the ability to hold their breath for three to four minutes under water.

Otters are usually born in late winter or early spring in a litter of four cubs after a gestation period of nine to 12 months. At birth an otter weighs about 5 ounces.

A river otter's thick and furry hair is nearly black to reddish or a grayish brown on its back. The hair on the belly is lighter, silvery or grayish brown. Its nose is diamond shaped, with two nostrils at the lower half.

The North American river otter likes to eat fish, crustaceans, amphibians, reptiles, birds and insects.

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