

## Otters in our Waters



While some people complain about winter, the local river otters make the best of a good situation. At times, these playful critters quite literally slide through life.

[http://www.nps.gov/romo/naturescience/river\\_otter.htm](http://www.nps.gov/romo/naturescience/river_otter.htm)

River otters are the largest members of the weasel family found in New Hampshire. They can weigh between 11 and 31 pounds and grow from 25 to 40 inches in length. They have thick, water-repellant brown fur, webbed feet, and a powerful tail for swimming. They have agile paws that are also sensitive to touch. Their thick whiskers help them to navigate under water and on land. For food, river otters eat mostly fish, but they also partake of crayfish, mussels, amphibians, or turtles if the opportunity arises. Like all weasels, river otters have long, slender bodies and are excellent hunters.

Although they are fairly common, few people are lucky enough to see river otters in action. These sleek hunters are active during dawn and dusk and spend much of their time in water-side burrows out of the view of humans. They hunt mostly underwater and rest in burrows. Winter time, however, offers a few more opportunities to see these critters as they walk, run, bound, or slide over ice or snow near the river or beaver dam impoundments. Some lucky outdoors people might witness younger otters engaged in a session of practice wrestling or chase with their siblings.

River otters generally live 8 or 9 years in the wild. They have few natural predators in the water, but on land they can be preyed upon by bobcats, coyotes, dogs, and red foxes. Most river otters die from human-caused factors such as road-kill, trapping, illegal shooting, or from an accumulation of toxins that were eaten by the fish that were later eaten by the otters.

To make sure river otters and many of our other wild critters enjoy a positive future, NH wildlife biologist Eric Orff concludes, "we must protect and preserve more of the large wooded habitat blocks in New Hampshire, especially those along our rivers and streams. We must link these areas with wildlife corridors along our rivers by protecting the riparian corridor at streams' edges. Recent studies show that protecting a greenway 300 feet wide along our rivers and streams could maintain nearly 80 percent of the states' diversity of species -- including many of our wily weasels." That "otter" be pretty easy... give them their space and they will continue to make our rivers truly special.