

The Long Island River Otter Project

An effort to establish the status and distribution of River Otters on Long Island, NY

Funded by the Baker Foundation and Land Marks
and
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DON RIEPE PHOTO

We need your help!

Please report sightings or sign of River Otter to:

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ABOUT RIVER OTTERS

The River Otter (*Lontra canadensis*) was once found in every state in the continental U.S. and every Canadian province. By 1900, trapping for its highly valued fur, the lack of conservation laws during the Fur Trade (1650-1850), water pollution, and habitat loss resulted in the extermination of the otter from many parts of its former range. Since the 1970s, 21 states have implemented re-introduction efforts, including New York in 1995.

Despite its common name, the River Otter inhabits lakes, ponds, swamps and marshes as well as rivers. It is also found in coastal areas, including the saline waters of tidal estuaries such as the Peconic and Gardiners Bays, Long Island Sound, and the Great South Bay. Unlike the Sea Otter found on the Pacific coast, saltwater reduces the insulative value of River Otter fur, and the latter species requires a freshwater rinse after fishing in the bay. Although considered an aquatic mammal with specific adaptations for swimming, River Otters spend 75% of their time on land.

The otter's diet includes fish, shellfish, frogs, snakes, turtles, birds, large aquatic insects and the occasional muskrat, but fish comprise the bulk of their prey. Otters forage in shallow water, diving to depths of 50 feet but concentrating fishing efforts in water less than 10 feet deep, including intertidal and shoreline areas where they hunt on foot.

Females seek remote den sites to have their young in late winter and spring. The most commonly used dens are abandoned beaver lodges, of which there are none on Long Island. If there are breeding otters here, fox and woodchuck dens may serve as den sites.

Otters exhibit a remarkably long period of parental care. Pups remain in the den for 3-4 months, are fed by their mother for up to 9 months, and are taught fishing skills until 1.5 years of age. Sightings of three or more otters may be a family unit, and evidence of a breeding population.

RIVER OTTERS ON LONG ISLAND

The River Otter was once common on Long Island but, according to a report published in 1842, it was extirpated here by the early 1800s. It is not clear if that report was accurate, but otter have certainly been very rare on Long Island over the past two hundred years. Between 1875 and 1969, eight otters were trapped or shot on Long Island. Naturalist Roy Latham and others reported a handful of otter sightings from 1920-1957. These sightings as well as a few captured individuals were on the Peconic River (1920s and 1930s), Shelter Island (1920s, 1941 and 1955), and Lake Montauk (1925 and 1928).

The last survey of otters on Long Island was done by Paul Connor as part of a general survey of Long Island's mammals over the years 1960-1963. No otters or otter sign were encountered at that time. In his report, Connor noted several reliable sightings of single otters made by others in the 1950's on Shelter Island, the Peconic River, on the north shore of Nassau County, and at two locations on the Great South Bay. Connor surmised that these sightings were of individuals that had swum across Long Island Sound from Connecticut, which had a relatively large and healthy population of otters at that time.

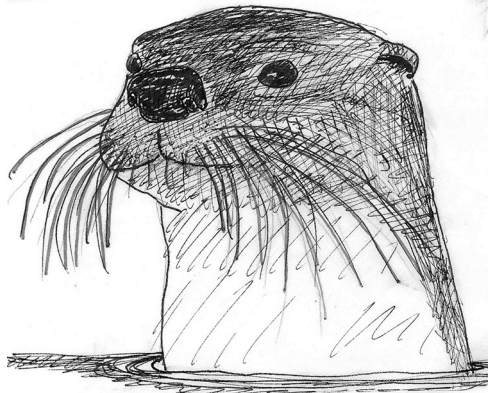
In the years since Connor's survey, an otter was caught in a fish trap in Montauk (1969), one was caught in a muskrat trap in Water Mill (early 1990s), another was trapped in Greenport (2001), and two road-killed otters were found in the 1990s (one near Cold Spring Harbor and another in Brookhaven).

The goal of this project is to document the population and distribution of River Otters on Long Island, which are currently unknown.

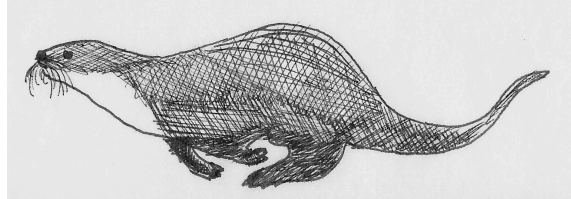
RIVER OTTER SIGHTINGS

The River Otter is a member of the Mustelid family with a characteristic weasel-like body (long and slim with short legs). Fully grown, it weighs 20 pounds and averages 3.5-4 feet in length, with its unusually-shaped tail being one-third of total length. Its short, dense fur is dark brown with a light-colored throat, and its feet are webbed.

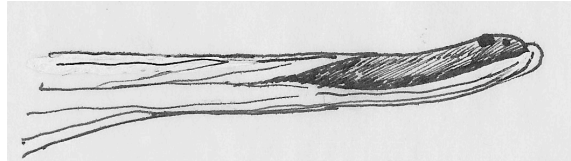
It is difficult to confuse an otter on land with anything else. But in the water, relative body size and shape can be difficult to determine. Our most common aquatic mammal, the muskrat, is much smaller. Watch carefully and note how the animal is swimming. Does it stop and raise its head and shoulders above the water like a periscope (otter)? Is there vegetation trailing from its mouth (muskrat)? Is it taking a fairly direct route and staying at the surface (muskrat), or twisting and turning and disappearing below the surface (otter)?



RIVER OTTER "PERISCOPING"



RIVER OTTER BOUNDING ON LAND



MUSKRAT SWIMMING

RIVER OTTER SIGN

River Otters are elusive and not easy to observe in the wild, therefore most surveys document their presence by finding and mapping their sign. Otter sign includes tracks, scat, other scent secretions, and slides. Tracking is a very useful survey technique in regions that have long periods of snow cover. Otter slides are much rarer than the popular literature would make them appear; the otter slides reported on the banks of the Carmans River were created by waterfowl climbing in and out of the water.

The Long Island River Otter Survey is relying on scat and other scent secretions left by otters. Otter scat is usually an unmistakable pile of fish scales and bones bound together with a sweet-smelling, blackish-green coating. Over time, weather and sun turns this into a loose pile of bleached scales and bones. They also secrete a very distinctive, white, jelly-like substance. Both are a means of communication among otters, and are often left near areas where otter must exit the water to get around a dam or other obstacle, or to travel overland to reach another pond or creek, and on points of land that jut into a waterway. Biologists refer to these as otter latrine sites.

Otter scat can be analyzed in a lab to determine how many individual otters are using a particular latrine site, and to estimate the otter population of a particular region.

If you would like to make a tax-deductible contribution to this project, please send a check payable to

Peconic Baykeeper / River Otter Project and mail to:
Peconic Baykeeper
P.O. Box 893
Quogue, NY 11959

Thank you!

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THIS PROJECT, VISIT THE WEBSITE: MIKEBOTTINI.COM