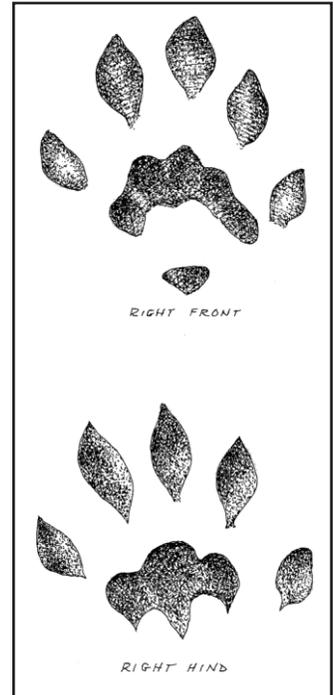
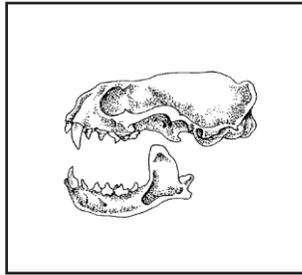
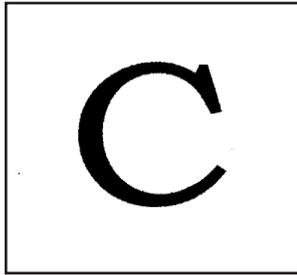
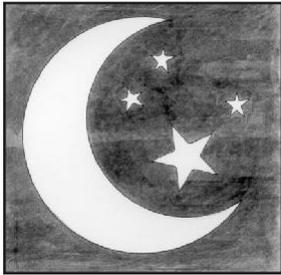




River Otter
 Family Mustelidae
Lutra canadensis



Otters are aquatic mammals that find most of their food in or near water. They love fish, frogs, crayfish, snakes and turtles (and their eggs), worms, insects, and the occasional muskrat. Otters can easily crunch through the shells of snails and mussels. Though they are considered **carnivorous**, they will eat aquatic plants.

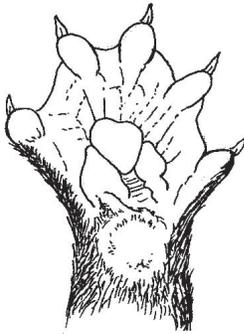
Fast, acrobatic swimmers that can propel themselves underwater for up to a quarter-mile and stay submerged up to four minutes without surfacing for air, otters can dive to 50 feet with the help of **valve-like structures that seal their ears and nose to keep out water**. Body flexing in an up and down motion pushes them through water while their feet and tail help them steer.

Otters have **excellent hearing and superb eyesight underwater** and fair eyesight on land. They have a keen sense of smell and long, stiff, sensitive whiskers just behind and below the nose. These whiskers are sense organs to help otters search for food in turbulent or murky water.



Consider yourself lucky if you ever see a river otter in the wilds of Pennsylvania. **Otters are secretive members of the mustelid family** that do not tolerate a lot of human activity. Good otter habitat requires clean water that supports the fish and other aquatic creatures the otters depend upon for their survival. Otters could be **considered a keystone species**, a species whose habitat provides for the needs of many other species besides itself. Lose the keystone species and other species suffer as well.

Otter dens can be found on the edges of lakes, rivers or streams, or on high ground in marshes. Otters may take over an abandoned beaver or muskrat lodge or excavate their own under tree roots or rock piles. Dens have an underwater entrance hole, a living space above the water level and both air holes and escape holes to nearby dry ground.



Otters are sleek, streamlined mustelids, perfect for moving swiftly through water. They are also muscular and solidly built, with short, stocky legs and a long, tapered tail that is covered with fur its entire length. Their face is broad, with small rounded ears and eyes that slightly protrude.

Although only about 10 inches in height, their bodies are over three feet long, with a tail that adds another 12–15 inches to their total length. A mature male otter can weigh up to 25 pounds. Adult females are slightly smaller.

Like minks and beaver, **otters have fur well-suited for aquatic habitats**. The oily underfur is covered by longer guard hairs to form two layers that repel water. Combined with a subcutaneous layer of fat, they are well-insulated against both cold air and water. As added protection against the cold, otter coats grow even thicker in autumn.

Their pelage is a rich dark brown with lighter underparts and a grayish throat and chin. Their nose is black and bare, and their whiskers, as discussed earlier, are stiff and prominent.

All four feet are wide and webbed between the toes, although the hind pair are larger and provide more propulsion through water than the front pair. They have five clawed toes on each foot.

Even the otter's head shape is designed for a life in water. Their eyes are placed high on the head so when partially submerged an otter can discreetly take a look at what is happening above the surface, much like a frog or an alligator.

Otters have more teeth than any other mustelid in Pennsylvania—36. **They are also the only carnivore in our state with five molars on each side of both the upper and lower jaws**, perfect for crushing shells.

Otters breed in the water between January and May. They too have delayed implantation so the young may not begin to develop in the female until the following December, January or February. So although there is only a two month gestation, the pups may not be born until a year or more after mating has occurred.

One to five pups are born blind and toothless. They do not open their eyes for five weeks, and their mother keeps them in the den until they are three or four months old. Once the pups are ready to emerge from the den, **their mother teaches them to swim**. She will carry or push each pup into the water while she submerges nearby, watching. When the pup tires, she will allow it to climb onto her back. The **swimming lessons are repeated until the pups can enter the water on their own and eventually play, hunt and feed in it**.





A Simple Review of River Otters



Otters are the largest member of the weasel or mustelid family. In Pennsylvania they live along secluded streams, rivers and marshes. They are **sleek, dark brown animals with a long, tapered, muscular body and long, tapered tail.** They have a broad head and small facial features. They are sometimes confused with minks and muskrats, but they are much bigger than either, up to four feet long, including their tail.

Otters are designed for life in the water. They have webbed feet for swimming, special nose and ear flaps that close to keep water out when they swim, and long, stiff whiskers that help them “see” underwater. They like to play. Biologists say their wrestling and playing help them be good hunters. Otters even like to slide down snow and mud banks.

Otters hunt in the water. They are **carnivores** who swim underwater for fish, crayfish and frogs. They’ll also eat birds and even aquatic plants. Clean water is very important to otters.

Rare in Pennsylvania, otters once suffered from **strip mine runoff and other toxic waste pollution in our rivers and streams.** Fortunately, today otters are benefiting from our efforts to reduce pollution.

Otters are secretive, so it’s difficult to know populations in the state. They are not allowed to be hunted, and since 1980 the PA Game Commission and the Wild Resource Conservation Fund and other partners have been restocking otters throughout the commonwealth.

Continuing these restocking efforts and keeping our rivers and streams clean should really help river otters in our state. Maybe, with a little luck, you will see a family of otters playing by a riverbank soon.



Otters can communicate by making sounds. They can chirp like a bird or grunt when playing or grooming. If they are fighting, they may scream. If you ever surprised one, you might make it snort.

Dens are used to raise 2–4 pups which are born in April or May. Dens could be hollow logs, brush piles, or abandoned beaver lodges. The pups are furry when born, but their eyes are closed for about a month. Pups are weaned at 8–10 weeks when they learn to swim. We know they are excellent swimmers, but did you know otters can stay underwater for up to four minutes? They've been known to dive down as far as 40 feet.

Otters are active all winter and will even swim under the ice of a frozen river or pond in search of food.