



Species Information

North American River Otters

(Lontra canadensis)

- Range:** Throughout North America, but rarely on Long Island
- Habitat:** Lakes, rivers, freshwater wetlands, salt marshes, and estuaries
- Length:** Average 3-4 feet, including tail. Males are larger than females.
- Weight:** 15-30 pounds
- Lifespan:** Up to 10 years in the wild, but their life span can double under zoo and aquarium care.

How do I look?

North American river otters are the largest members of the Mustelidae (weasel, ferret, mink) family. River otters have wide, flattened heads with small, close-set eyes and small, rounded ears; long, sleek, muscular bodies, and long, tubular tails. Their fur is dark brown on top, with a lighter belly and grayish throat. They have prominent facial whiskers.

I'm hungry.

North American river otters feed primarily on fish, but will also eat insects, frogs, turtles, crayfish, crabs, and occasionally small mammals and water birds. They catch prey with their mouths and use their forelimbs to hold it.

Adaptations for swimming.

North American river otters have hollow, oily guard hairs for waterproofing, over a layer of downy fur that holds warm air bubbles against their skin. This specially adapted fur helps to keep them warm and dry while swimming. Their fur is also very dense, and they sport a layer of fat beneath their skin, another adaptation for staying warm while swimming in cold water. Their streamlined, muscular bodies, short powerful legs, and webbed toes all work in concert to allow them to attain swimming speeds of up to 7 mph. Other adaptations for swimming include nostrils and ears that close under water, and nearsightedness on land, an adaptation for underwater vision (a spherical-shaped lens compensates for the refractive qualities of water). In addition, when submerged, their eyes are protected by a clear eyelid called a nictitating membrane.



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What's that you say?

North American river otters vocalize with many different sounds. They whistle, growl, chuckle, chirp, grunt (when playing or grooming), scream (when fighting and mating), and snort (when frightened or surprised).

Shh! Otters sleeping.

North American river otters are generally nocturnal and will spend most of the day resting in temporary shelters (burrows, rock or wood piles, root areas under large trees). Permanent dens are constructed in the burrows of beavers and muskrats, or in natural hollows under logs or in river banks. Dens usually have an underwater entrance which leads via a tunnel up to a nest chamber above water level, that is lined with grass, moss, bark and fur.

Reproduction.

North American river otters mate once a year, in water, in late winter or early spring. Although their gestation period is two months, females will not give birth until the late winter or early spring of the following year, as they exhibit delayed implantation of the embryo. North American river otters have two or three pups, which are born with fur but are helpless, with their eyes closed. They are usually weaned at three or four months but will stay with their mother for up to 1 year. They reach sexual maturity at two to three years old.

Are North American river otters in danger of becoming extinct?

North American river otters are rare or extirpated from many parts of their range, particularly throughout much of the eastern, central, and southern US. Their decline is due to over-hunting and habitat destruction. Efforts are being made to reintroduce North American river otters to areas where they have disappeared. Being wild collected, Atlantis Marine World's river otters will be enrolled in the Species Survival Program with zoos and aquariums across the USA. Their gene pool is very valuable, and long-range goals are to get them breeding and to possibly reintroduce their young back into the wild where they are rare or are no longer found.