

RIVER OTTER (*Lutra canadensis*)

Description

The river otter is a large weasel like, nocturnal animal ranging from 35 to 53 inches in length. Its broad flattened head, prominent whiskers, moderately sized eyes, and small ears characterize it. Its webbed feet make it a strong and graceful swimmer. The tail is 12 to 18 inches long, thick at the base, and tapers toward the tip. The back of the otter is rich dark brown, which appears almost black when wet. The underside is a silvery gray or light brown. The diet of the otter consists mainly of fish. They also feed on frogs, crayfish, turtles, and insects; sometimes birds and small mammals.

Distribution

Presently the river otter is found in or near streams, rivers and lakes throughout the United States except for parts of the southwest. Although their range covers all of Nebraska, otters are very rarely seen.

Habitat

The river otter prefers waterways that have timber nearby and an abundance of available food; including streams, lakes, ponds, swamps, marshes, estuaries, beaver flowages, and exposed outer coast (Pacific Northwest, Alaska). Otters rarely dig their own homes, instead utilizing existing burrows built in the banks of rivers or lakes by beavers and muskrats. Often the burrow will have an above water entrance for the summer as well as an underwater opening for the winter.

Status

Global: G5-Secure. Federally not listed. State Threatened. Nebraska: S2-Imperiled. It is thought that extensive trapping of these animals for their sleek fur was responsible for their disappearance in Nebraska. Between August 1986 and March 1991, 159 otters were released at 7 locations in Nebraska. Reintroduction is considered successful and complete. Large range in much of North America north of Mexico; population trend probably is relatively stable; recent reintroduction and management efforts have improved conservation status.

Management

In order to help maintain and improve existing river otter populations, habitat protection and restoration is crucial. Streams and other waterways need to be protected from extensive livestock and human disturbances. Restoration and enhancement of floodplain wetlands has shown to benefit otters. Planting trees or other bank stabilizing plants along rivers and streams would also keep them suitable for otters. Otters are highly susceptible to overharvest, in areas where otters occur, methods are being explored to reduce accidental take from trapping. It is also necessary to refine techniques for successful reintroduction.

More Information

<http://www.ngpc.state.ne.us/wildlife/otters.asp>

<http://ecos.fws.gov/speciesProfile/profile/speciesProfile.action?sPCODE=A0HY>