



# FAST FACTS about



# RIVER OTTERS

## DESCRIPTION

The North American River Otter is a water-loving mammal well-adapted to life on land and water. It is thin and sleek, reaching 3 – 4 feet (0.9 – 1.2 m) in length and 10 – 30 lbs (5 – 14 kg). They have short, thick dark brown fur on their back that turns to a reddish-yellow color on their stomach. They use their webbed feet and thick tails to propel rapidly, up to 7 miles (11 km) per hour through the water and 15 miles (24 km) on land. They can stay submerged for up to 8 minutes, and reach depths of 60 feet (18 m). Sexual maturity is between 2 – 3 years old, with mating occurring from December to April. The gestation period is 60 – 63 days and the litter size is 2 – 5 pups. Their average life expectancy in the wild is 16 years.



## HABITAT, BEHAVIOR, AND DIET

River otters prefer the fresh water of rivers, creeks, ponds, lakes, and swamps but can be found in coastal salt marshes like those around the FSUCML. They live in dens called holts that are dug into a riverbank or under tree roots. A typical holt has a main underwater entrance, leading to a space above the water that has several holes to allow air flow.

They feed nocturnally on insects, crustaceans, fish, amphibians, reptiles, and birds, relying on their keen eyesight, hearing, and smell to detect their prey. Their sensitive whiskers help them find food on the riverbed. They love to play with their food – wrestling, chasing, playing catch and release – to help hone their hunting skills. While playing or grooming, they tend to make chirping and grunting sounds, but during mating or fighting they elicit high-pitched squeals that can be heard over a mile away.

## CONSERVATION

The primary threats to river otters are habitat loss and pollution, especially related to the bioaccumulation of mercury and organochloride compounds. Because of this sensitivity and their position as top level predators, scientists use them as bioindicators of problems in aquatic ecosystems. Protecting water quality and habitat are primary roads to protecting river otter populations. To learn more about about how to protect our water resources, scan the QR code.

