

Making Ripples

by Amanda Bancroft

One of our most playful Arkansas residents is the river otter. There is something caricature-esque about them, with their big black noses and streamlined bodies. A hundred or so years ago, we'd find it hard to spot one in our state due to the decrease in beaver populations combined with overhunting of otters for their pelts. Today, it is still a magical, rare sight to see one playing in a river, but at least we've got better chances now that their population is rebounding and they can be found in all counties.

According to Sealander and Heidt's *Arkansas Mammals*, recently "there appears to have been an increase in the otter population which has paralleled the increases in muskrat, beaver, and nutria populations." These animals forage for their living along waterways. Otters are more commonly found in the Gulf Coastal Plain and along rivers, but they have been known to cross miles of dry land. Family groups and individuals can travel quite a distance in their home range to find food, with individual otters able to traipse or swim through 60 miles within a year. Males can travel more than five miles in one night. Females with kits generally keep to an area of around four square miles.

Females reach sexual maturity at about two years old. Mating usually occurs in the water, and the young develop within about sixty days. The female takes up her abode in existing riverside apartments formerly created by beavers, nutria (which are not a native species), woodchucks, red fox, or muskrats. Or, she may pick a hollow log, natural rock formation, or protected depression under debris. Litter size is variable, from one to six. When the kits emerge from the burrow at 10-12 weeks, they must then be taught to swim, ironically! Male otters, which are larger in size than the females, aren't permitted to meet and play with the young until they grow to be six months old.

River otters have a bad reputation for eating fish favored by the commercial fishing industry, but in reality their diet is broad and focused on consuming "rough fish that are easier to catch." They can eat turtles, small animals, insects, frogs, crayfish, clams, snakes, mussels, muskrats, and the occasional duck. They have webbed feet, a muscular tail, and slick flexible bodies that help them travel and hunt. Their coat keeps them warm even in winter waters because it's well-insulated and water repellent. Otters are mostly nocturnal or crepuscular during spring, summer, and fall, but become more active during the daytime in winter.

They are quite social, vocal, and inquisitive. A group of otters is sometimes called a "romp" because of their playful nature. In the water, an otter gathering is called a "raft." Safety in numbers means that even larger animals that could pose a threat can be intimidated and chased away. Threats include alligators, red fox, bobcat, mountain lion, black bear and other North American predators.

We are extremely lucky to live in an era where it isn't unheard of to have river otters curiously cut through the water following kayaks like a group of porpoises trailing a boat. Let's appreciate each playful slide of the otter for as long as we can.

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