

# THE RIVER OTTER JOURNAL

Volume V, Number 1, Fall 1996



## Otters on the Internet

by Tracy Johnston

Otter lovers can get the latest updates on research, reintroduction programs, and otter rehabilitation taking place world-wide by searching the Internet. If you simply type "otters" at a search prompt, you can encounter a list of 847 web pages that mention the word "otters." Beware though, the "otters" mentioned in the web pages aren't all members of the Mustelidae family!

You'll encounter web pages on sports teams or those selling sea kayaks, wet suits and software. You will also find children's drawings of otters, tributes to books about otters, and even a web page dedicated to Otter Pops frozen snacks. (The "(Otter) Pops in Prominent Places" home page shows Otter Pop characters and their 'Influence' on world events, like Alexander The Grape causing the break up of Prince Charles and Princess Diana's marriage. A photo of Alexander with the former Royal couple is even included.)

Some states' national resources or fish and wildlife departments even have

web pages that mention otters. Information on river otter reintroductions in Indiana and Nebraska can be found on the Internet. (See articles on page 6.) Other interesting and informative web pages on otters include:

### *The International Otter Survival Fund (IOSF)*

[http://www.smo.uhi.ac.uk/~dobhnan/iosf/iosf\\_home.html](http://www.smo.uhi.ac.uk/~dobhnan/iosf/iosf_home.html)

Located on Scotland's Isle of Skye, the International Otter Survival Fund's mission is "...to preserve otters by safeguarding areas of good habitat and supporting people working in research and rehabilitation of otters worldwide." The IOSF home page lists membership information, posts their most recent newsletters, and lists brief updates on the plight of the 13 species of otters throughout the world.

### *Friends of the Sea Otter (FSO)*

<http://infomanage.com/mbk/mbkfos.html>

The Friends of the Sea Otter is a non-profit organization based in Monterey, California dedicated to the protection of sea otters. FSO activities include protection and preservation efforts, research, and educational outreach for sea otters. Activities also include the California Ocean Assistance Spill Team (COAST), a volunteer-based oil spill response team.

### *The Marine Mammal Center*

<http://www.tnmc.org/>

The Marine Mammal Center provides rescue and care efforts by providing emergency care for stranded animals, veterinary care, captive sea otter husbandry, and water quality and life support systems for sea otter holding facilities.



## Table of Contents

Otters on the Internet	1
ROA Mission	1
President's Message	2
Kylarhea Otter Haven	3
Exciting Encounter	3
Tracking Otters	4, 5
Reintroduction Updates	6
Ban on Leghold Traps	6
Mountain Otter Poem	6
Membership Information	7
About Your President	7-8

THE RIVER OTTER JOURNAL  
is a semi-annual publication of the  
River Otter Alliance. Look for the next  
edition of THE RIVER OTTER JOURNAL  
in Spring 1997!

## River Otter Alliance Mission

The River Otter Alliance promotes the survival of the North American River Otter (*Lutra Canadensis*) through education, research and habitat protection. We support current research and reintroduction programs, monitor abundance and distribution in the United States, and educate the general public through our newsletter, THE RIVER OTTER JOURNAL, on the need to restore and sustain River Otter populations.

Our goal is to be a center of communications among wildlife biologists, environmental organizations, fishermen, and all interested otter lovers on a national and international basis, in order to ensure the healthy future of the North American River Otter.

## President's Message

While writing this message, I am sitting on a river bank tucked in amongst the pines looking out into the waterway and reflecting on the elusive river otters I have seen behaving here plus imagining (through signs) the behavior of the ones I have not directly experienced. Although I may not see the animals often, I do see their signs and know there has been some successful breeding in my study area so, yes, this Colorado State Endangered Species is surviving from a reintroduction project which occurred between 1978 and 1984 in the headwaters of the Colorado River. This knowledge brings to focus what I personally and we as a group are all about: contributing to the conservation of the North American River Otter. How can we of the River Otter Alliance accomplish this goal? One specific way is through this publication. We want to bring together both people who are professionally involved with otters and people who just care about them.

We want to publish input from the research on river otters and input from peoples' personal experiences with them (both past and present). In addition to our membership, copies of our publication are given to libraries and schools in our area; we would like to see members throughout our distribution do likewise. Another way we hope to accomplish our goal is through education of the public. I personally give formal slide presentations and informal talks to audiences in Colorado, which we as a group hope to expand into the schools of our area. This gets people of all ages interested and involved. An experimental educational kit is being developed for an elementary school in my study area, which could also be distributed to other schools, especially where river otters occur. If children learn about river otters and begin to look for them and their signs now, they may develop an interest in their survival. This can lead to a positive outlook for otters both now and in the future when these children become adults. Perhaps seeing an otter frolicking in the waters while you were growing up led to your own awareness and interest in this species!

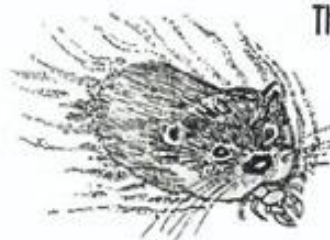


Judy Berg

My husband, David, and I recently visited the Isle of Skye in Scotland for a vacation and to meet with Paul and Grace Yoxon, Directors of the International Otter Survival Fund (IOSF). They are delightful people and very dedicated to the conservation of otters

throughout the world. Basically, their large group funds research and conservation projects in various countries, organizes public education programs and supports otter rehabilitation facilities. They also conduct their own research on the Isle of Skye and surrounding islands and house a rehabilitation facility. Our small River Otter Alliance group is now proud to be affiliated with their group. While on the Isle of Skye, David and I had other special experiences: we saw two Eurasian Otters which the Yoxons are rehabilitating in their facility for eventual release, one free living otter swimming in its marine environment, otter tracks in the mud, and, yes, their droppings (scat). Then, when we thought there could not be any more special experiences for us on Skye—prior to taking the ferry back to the mainland—we discovered the Kylerhea Otter Haven. There while in their public viewing hide, we met June Gerrard who works at the facility. (See article on page 3.) June shared with us her otter-related experiences and videos she had taken at the facility, including one of a female otter with her cub. For David and me personally, the Isle of Skye was unforgettable. For our group, becoming affiliated with other people who are dedicated to the conservation of otter species both in Scotland and throughout the world is very rewarding.

Now with your help, we can attain our goals and add new goals which will lead to the survival and preservation of our North American River Otter. Our group can have a much stronger voice in river otter conservation with your help. Please show us you care. Please get involved and give us your input.



**The otters need you!**

## Kylerhea Otter Haven

by June Gerrard

*Editor's Note: Kylerhea Otter Haven is a wildlife viewing hide open to the public. This facility is maintained by Forest Enterprises which is a part of the Crown's Forestry Commission. It is located along the eastern coast of the Isle of Skye, across from mainland Scotland. The author is an employee at the Otter Haven.*

All records taken at the Otter Haven are made by actual visual observations of otters in their natural habitat. There is no contact with the otters whatsoever so that the behavior that we and the public see is completely natural. This year there are five resident otters at the haven which covers an area of approximately 1-1/2 kilometers of coastline. The otters seem to



be related to each other being Dog, Bitch with Cub, and two siblings (last season's cubs). The haven is situated on the narrows between Skye and the mainland so food is abundant in the sea and also in freshwater ponds and burns. The terrain is rocky and is mostly inaccessible to man. The otters at Kylerhea, the remainder of Skye and the whole of the northwest coast of Scotland are diurnal—they can be seen at any time of day—but sadly, as of yet,

we have not found out how to predict exactly when they will appear! There seems to be a mixture of variables, depending on at what state of tide a certain food is accessible, when is the season of food type, what the weather is like (younger otters and bitch with cub tend to avoid rain if possible), how hungry the otter is, and (it seems sometimes!) whether the otter feels like showing itself that day!

## Exciting River Otter Encounter

by Ann and Jim Feucht, Rocky Mountain National Park Volunteers

Since April 3, 1995, we've seen numerous river otters in Grand Lake and the channel between it and Shadow Mountain Lake. However nothing was more exciting than the encounter we witnessed on April 12, 1996!

The otters were squealing and screeching and making quite a racket that day. They were located down by the foot bridge at the channel entrance near the boat dock of the James' Grand Lake property. Although ice covers most of Grand Lake at that time of year, the channel and some distance into Grand Lake was ice free. We



cautiously approached the area of the noises. At first we observed trails of blood in the snow, apparently from some of the otters fighting. This was soon confirmed when two otters emerged from beneath the James' dock. More otters appeared later and proceeded to run and slide on the ice directly in front of the boat dock. It was a sight to see them rolling, sliding and playing. If that wasn't enough excitement

to witness, next came a pair on the ice. They were running, sliding, cavorting, and apparently mating!

It appeared at least one pair took up housekeeping beneath the James' dock the previous spring, because we later observed—particularly on May 26—a family of otters. The young were cavorting with their parents in open water, just east of the Grand Lake foot bridge.



Many other otter sightings have been made in the area, but have not been officially recorded. It's great to see otters and know they are healthy and making a come back to the Colorado River basin.

# Tracking Otters

By Judith K. Berg

*River otters are primarily elusive, shy animals throughout much of their range in our country. There are, however, some regions, so I have been told, where they may be viewed directly and quite often. Those of you living in such areas are very lucky and can perhaps not only see the otters but also see them making the signs. Most of us are not so blessed, so we must be detectives in nature.*

OK, otter sleuths, lets begin! The front and larger hind feet of the otter are each endowed with five well-developed toes with partial webbing between each toe. The webbing will not always show in a track, depending on the substrate and the locomotion of the animal. Also, sometimes there can be some spread between the toes with even the heel showing up in a track, thereby increasing the size. Other times, particularly when the animal is running or galloping, it may leave a digitigrade pattern. Sorry, nothing is simple. Look for the five toe pattern in a track but, with experience, even if only a four toe pattern is seen, it can be distinguished from a dog or fox, for example, because canine tracks are symmetrical compared to the otter's, which are asymmetrical. Best advice is to look for the five toes! A good general rule for an otter's tracks are the following measurements: forefoot - 2 to 3 inches wide and 3 to 4 inches long; hindfoot - 3 to 4



inches wide and 4 to 5 inches long. In mud on a bank next to the water, I recently measured one set of tracks which were 3 inches wide by 4 inches long with tracks 4 inches wide by 5 inches long and another set of tracks which were 2 inches wide by 2-1/2 inches long with tracks 3 inches wide and 3 inches long. This indicated at least two different otters with one decisively smaller than the other—perhaps a female with her young.

What other animal tracks might you confuse with those of the otter? Mink and fisher (where they occur) are similar. The mink's tracks, as is the animal, are smaller than the otter's; both the forefeet and the hind feet will be one to two inches wide and long. If you have fishers in your area, refer to a field guide since the size of their tracks are similar to that of the otters, but, remember, they do not have webbing between the toes.

Although otters do travel across land, particularly to get from one waterway to another, most of the signs you will see will be near water. The most distinct otter slides and tracks I've seen have been during the winter when there is snow and ice covering the waterways. My first truly distinct signs were at the end of November when ice was forming on the river. A series of alternating otter tracks and slides were prevalent in a continuous movement as the animal must have pushed itself across the snow and ice on its belly. The

measured tracks were between two and three inches wide and four inches long. Since there was one continuous movement across the ice it indicated only one otter. The slides were eight inches wide and 20 to 30 feet long. When sliding the otter will either coast down an embankment on its belly with forefeet held along its sides and rear feet held out behind or, as in this case, get a 'running start' and slide on its belly across the ice and then continue by pushing itself when reaching the end of a slide. I often find slides extending from one water hole in the ice to another; these water holes allow the otters to emerge from under the ice to breathe and then return to the water. Sometimes they will make troughs in the snow by pushing themselves with their feet tucked under their bodies so you will see tracks mixed in with the slide. When measuring this type of slide in one area which showed much activity, I found slides that were 6 inches wide and tracks in the slide



*Forefoot and hind foot of River Otter. Note webbing between toes.*

showing all five toes that were 2 inches by 2 inches. Other slides in this same area were eight inches wide with tracks in the slides showing all five toes that were 3 inches by 3 inches. This indicated at least two different sized otters in this area. Slides of otters can measure six to 10 inches wide with much variance in length depending on the slope and the behavior. Don't forget that melting of ice and snow can affect the measurements! Also, otters do slide in mud so for those of you who do not have snow in your area but do have otters, you can also find slides on mud banks. Sometimes otters slide either down a bank or through a bank hole to reach a waterway so look for these too. Mink will also make slides but the width is only 3 to 4 inches.

You may find a set of tracks accompanied by a tail drag, which is another good indication of an otter. I have measured one such sign in the snow with two tracks being 2 inches wide and 3 inches long, and two tracks being 3 inches wide and 4 inches long, with the tail drag 12 inches long and 3 inches wide at the base and one inch wide at the tip.

If you find any of the above signs but don't see the otter making them, use your imagination and picture the animal moving and playing in the area. Otters are known to be a very playful species and have been seen sliding down embankments of mud or snow for no apparent reason except to have fun. Make notes of the facts (measurements) then sit down and use your imagination to paint a picture of river otter behavior in the wild! This might help lead you to an understanding of caring for this special species.

Otters come up onto land from a waterway to roll and groom their fur. This helps them maintain the insulating quality of the fur. They may also scent mark the area for use in olfactory communication. These "haul outs" or rolling areas are not always clearly distinguishable unless there are other otter signs in the area. These areas can be found at all times of the year so they may be matted down vegetation or depressions in the snow; those I have found are within about 10 feet from a waterway. Other signs nearby will cinch this one.



Otter Slide with tracks.



Otter Scat

Finally, the sign I get most excited about, since it has become an important part of my research, is that of the droppings (excrement) called scat. I have collected over 100 otter scats, and counting. Of the scats that I have collected, the appearance has been either black and shiny or black and mucousy, with no particular shape, containing distinguishable fish bones and having a fishy odor (probably from the anal scent gland); or a dull red color, tubular shaped, with distinguishable crayfish parts; or piles of fish bones in a known otter area or with recognizable scat; or tubular shaped black scat with vertebrate and/or invertebrate parts. These scats have been collected most often on small and large boulders jutting out into a waterway or next to it, on

logs jutting into the water, or on land five to twenty feet from a waterway. From the first 50 scats I analyzed, 59% contained coarse fish scales (& bones) from the Catostomidae family (suckers), 22% contained fine fish scales (& bones) from the Salmonidae family (trout and salmon), 13% contained crayfish parts and the remainder was from various invertebrates.

I hope this information will be helpful to you otter sleuths in finding some of their signs. Remember to carry a pencil and paper to note what you find, a small plastic ruler to measure your clues, a point and shoot camera to photograph what you see and the habitat where you see it, and, if you aren't squeamish, baggies to collect scat. Make this a fun family or friend outing. Then when you get home, put the information (clues) together and see what emerges. If we get some feedback from you all, we could start a section in our publication from your input. You may also add some humor from your experiences, such as one from mine while measuring a mud slide and inadvertently trying it, thus sliding into the muck and water below. Do, however, be careful, but, like the otter, have fun with the experience. Happy otter tracking!

## Tracking Field Guides for More Information

**Forrest, Louise R. (1988).**  
*Field Guide to Tracking Animals in Snow.* Stackpole Books, Harrisburg, PA.

**Halfpenny, James (1986).**  
*A Field Guide to Mammal Tracking in North America.* Johnson Books, Boulder, CO.

**Murie, Olaus J. (1974).**  
*A Field Guide to Animal Tracks: The Peterson Field Guide Series.* Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, MA.

**Rezendes, Paul (1993).**  
*Tracking & the Art of Seeing: How to Read Animal Tracks & Signs.* Camden House Publishing, Inc. Charlotte, VT.



## Otter Reintroduction Updates

by Tracy Johnston

### Nebraska Reintroduction Project:

The state of Nebraska began a reintroduction project after the river otter was designated an endangered species in 1986. The goal of the project was to restore a self-sustaining statewide population. Releases were completed at seven sites throughout the state between August 1986 and March 1991. Optimism about the success of the reintroduction project is based on frequent reports of otter sightings—including family groups—near the release sites, and the excellent physical condition of recovered otter carcasses. The reintroduction program was carried out through the Nebraska Game and Parks Commissions' Threatened and Endangered Species Program. Funding for the project came primarily from the Nongame Wildlife Tax Check-off and a donation from the Nebraska Safari Club.

### Rocky Mountain National Park 1996 Otter Survey:

On February 24, 1996, 19 routes in Rocky Mountain National Park, Colorado were surveyed for signs of river otters. The survey was part of follow up studies used to measure the stability of the 41 otters reintroduced to the park between 1978 and 1984. This same survey was also completed in 1989, 1990, 1992 and 1994. No otters were observed, however

slides, tracks, urine spots, and scat indicated the river otter population is stable with 15 otters apparently using the surveyed area.

### Seventy-five otters released in Indiana:

The Indiana Department of Natural Resources released 75 river otters in January 1996 as part of a reintroduction program to re-establish the population which disappeared from the state around 1942. The otters were released in the Tippecanoe River watershed and the Muscatatuck River basin. Fresh fish kills, slide marks and otter sightings shows the otters are adapting well to their new home. The Indiana River Otter Reintroduction Program was begun in 1995. The goal of the project is to release 325 river otters into six areas of Indiana by 1999. The project began with the release of 25 river otters in 1995, 20 of which are thought to be alive and thriving in southern Indiana. The reintroduction project is funded almost exclusively by donations to the Nongame and Endangered Wildlife Fund through Indiana's state income tax form. Donations to the Fund can also be sent to:

Endangered Wildlife Fund  
Indiana Division of Fish and Wildlife  
402 W. Washington Street, Rm. W273  
Indianapolis, IN 46204-2267

## Ban on Leghold Traps

by Carol Peterson

Fur trapping in the United States is regulated at the state level. On the November ballot, Colorado voters passed Amendment 14 which prohibits the taking of wildlife with any leghold trap, instant body-gripping design trap, or by poison or snare. This amendment will help prevent the accidental trapping or injury of river otter and will help their fragile recovery.

The European Union (E.U.) has proposed a regulation that would restrict the importation of furs from countries that do not ban leghold traps, including the United States, to encourage an internationally agreed humane trapping standard. The ban was to go into effect January 1996, however only the Netherlands has unilaterally imposed the import ban pending the E.U. administrative action.

The ROA asks your support in encouraging other states to take a similar initiative as Colorado and to support a National Ban on the export of leghold-trapped river otter pelts.

## Mountain Otter

by John Mulvihill

*There is a wise otter named Jake  
Who lives in great joy at Grand Lake  
He makes a fine slide  
On which he can glide  
He plays from the time he's awake*

*He pretends he has many friends  
Marking the stream where it bends  
The trackers all shout  
"See, the otters are out"  
When they find all the signals he sends*

*It may be that he's only one  
But we don't interfere with his fun  
Our spirits still soar  
And we pray to see more  
That the time of the otter's not done*

*It's tough in the snow at the Lake  
The sign is quite real, not a fake  
We exult that he's there  
That he may be a pair  
He's got to survive for our sake*

Meet Judy Berg...

## About Your President

Your new president this year is Judy Berg, a wildlife researcher whose work has focused on endangered mammals from around the world. The majority of her studies have been at the San Diego Wild Animal Park in San Pasqual, California. The park is an atypical captive environment where animals inhabit enclosures in the many tens of acres in size and exhibit many of the same behaviors they normally exhibit in the wild. Judy's professional dream, however, has always been to study an endangered species in the wild. This dream was realized in 1992 when, after relocating to Colorado with her husband, she began studying the rein-



Judy Berg

troduced population of river otters in the headwaters of the Colorado River and its tributaries.

Judy began her career in animal behavior in 1974 when she was invited to participate in a study of the repertoire of behaviors of African elephants at Lion Country Safari in Laguna Niguel, California. She pursued this study with the dedicated commitment that is Judy's only manner of doing everything she endeavors. In 1976 the results were corroborated by a similar study at the San Diego Wild Animal Park, which was published in *Applied Animal Ethology*. During this latter project, Judy became curious about how vocalizations are used by elephants to regulate their behavior. This became the subject of her graduate studies, the thesis of which was published in the very prestigious *Zeitschrift fur Tierpsychologie*. With the

aid of sonograms, Judy was the first researcher to establish that elephants communicate below the bound of human hearing, thus pioneering a new area of study for field researchers. Judy's last project with African elephants was a study of developmental behavior of elephant calves. A highlight of Judy's work with the elephants was the opportunity to visit Cynthia Moss at her research camp in Amboseli National Park and be amidst her research subjects in the wild.

From elephants, Judy moved on to study the behaviors of the very endangered Japanese serow and central Chinese goral, both relatives of the North American mountain goat. These projects were highlighted by an invitation to present her work at an international conference in Japan and publish her results in a book on the subject of this tribe of animals. On her trip to Japan, Judy saw eight wild serows in one day; the most ever seen in a day. This was followed by behavioral studies on

*continued on page 8*

## The River Otter Alliance

**ENROLL NOW FOR 1997!**

As a member you will be supporting research and education to help ensure the survival of *Lutra Canadensis*, the North American River Otter. You will receive a semi-annual newsletter, *THE RIVER OTTER JOURNAL*, with updates on otter-related:



*Educational Programs  
Environmental Issues  
Research Information  
River System and  
Population Surveys*

*and much more!*

**Make Address Correction Below or on Mailing Label:**

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City/State/Zip \_\_\_\_\_

**Annual Membership Dues:**

- \$15 ..... Student
- \$25 ..... Individual
- \$35 ..... Family
- \$50 ..... Sustaining
- \$100 ..... Sponsoring

Complete and return this form with your 1997 membership check to:

**THE RIVER OTTER ALLIANCE  
6733 S. Locust Court  
Englewood, CO 80112**

## About Your President

*continued from page 7*

okapi, an endangered relative of the giraffe living in tropical Africa, and barasingha deer, a rare species of India. Every one of Judy's studies has resulted in at least one scientific publication as well as presentations to popular audiences, thus fulfilling her objective of making a contribution to the field of wildlife conservation.

Since the spring of 1992, Judy has been studying the population of Colorado endangered river otters that were reintroduced into the headwaters of the Colorado River in Rocky Mountain National Park in the early eighties. Because the otters are seldom seen, Judy's study has focused on their signs, from which she has been able to derive many of their behaviors and feeding habits. Judy presented her work to the Wildlife Society in 1995 and to the Colorado-Wyoming Association of Scientists in 1996. She gives slide presentations

several times a year to visitors of Rocky Mountain National Park, as well as other groups. In the summer of 1996, Judy visited the Isle of Skye, Scotland, headquarters of the International Otter Survival Fund. There she was able to observe at least one otter in the wild and signs of others. She was also able to secure an affiliation for the River Otter Alliance with IOSF.

Judy's overall lifetime goal is to make a difference by contributing the results of her basic research to both the scientific and popular communities. As president of the River Otter Alliance, Judy hopes to project her love of and interest in this endangered mammal to a worldwide audience in pursuit of this goal.

Please join me in welcoming her as President of the River Otter Alliance.

— David Berg

## River Otter Alliance Board of Directors

*Judy Berg, President*

*David Berg, Vice President*

*Thacy Johnston, Secretary*

*John Mulvihill, Treasurer*

*Carol Peterson, Public Relations/Membership*

The River Otter Alliance is a non-profit, tax-exempt group which is organized to promote the survival of the North American River Otter (*Lutra Canadensis*) through education, research, reintroduction, and habitat protection.

All work and efforts for this organization and newsletter are on a volunteer basis by those who share a common concern for the welfare of the river otter and its habitat. We invite all interested persons to contribute their time at any level of the organization.



## The River Otter Alliance

6733 South Locust Court  
Englewood, Colorado 80112

### INSIDE:

*The latest in river otter sightings,  
research news, and interest stories!*





