

THE RIVER OTTER JOURNAL

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Rosetta—alias Oscar,
Little Buddy, and Micha—
at the Denver Zoo.

Photo by Carol Peterson

Denver Zoo Otter's Past Travel

by Carol Peterson



Rosetta, Denver Zoo's female otter, has a past history worth telling. It has been published in a storybook entitled My Buddy, Oscar the Otter, by David Kline. Rosetta, first known as Oscar, was orphaned as a pup and was rescued and hand-reared in Michigan by Eino Kangas. He fed her from a bottle and caught minnows to supplement her diet. She was featured in a special T.V. programming called "Discovering." Eino tried to teach her to be wild and then released her into Michigan's Seney Wildlife Refuge. Oscar learned to hunt food on her own, but she missed her friend's companionship. Soon she found some fishermen and literally jumped into their boat. They took her to a new home with a kind woman in Rexton, Michigan. Oscar was renamed "Little

Buddy", was taken jogging and fed ice-cream. Little Buddy was placed at the John Ball Zoo in Grand Rapids, Michigan when she became too bold to be kept as a pet, but was too tame for the wild. Our own Jan Reed-Smith was her keeper, and called her "Micha" during her stay. (See "A Keeper's Perspective" article.) Micha remained there for two years, and in 1993 she was transferred to the Minneapolis Zoo. Then in 1995, she was transferred to her present home at the Denver Zoo, and was renamed yet again to "Rosetta." Rosetta—alias Oscar, Little Buddy and Micha—has had an illustrious and humorous past. People of all ages enjoy her antics and are happy she has found a good home, excellent care and a male companion named Retaxus.

Email Communication Chain Begins

by Jan Reed-Smith

The IUCN Otter Specialist Group decided during the 1998 meeting held in Trebon, Czech Republic, March 14-19 to begin an email communication chain for all professionals working with otters. The goal of this email chain is to foster global communication between zoo personnel, field researchers, rehabilitators and university staff working with otters, or in otter research. Questions, comments, suggestions, or requests for information can be sent to jrsotter@iserv.net and will be forwarded to participants with expertise in the relevant area.

Individuals interested in participating are requested to send their name, professional affiliation, area(s) of interest/expertise, and email address to jrsotter@iserv.net.

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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 Fall 1998!

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

From Winter into Spring

As we have emerged from the winter months into those of spring, so has the otter. Just prior to spring, at the end of February, the otters left some of their signs in the form of slides, tracks, holes in the ice, and scat for us searchers in Rocky Mountain National Park's Winter Otter Survey. David and I returned to my study site to participate in the every-two-year event along with board members John, Carol, Tracy, and Tracy's husband, Chris. There were 40 people who volunteered for this year's event. It was a successful survey. The population in this Park reintroduction site of the Colorado River and drainages continues to remain stable at an estimated 16 to 18 otters. I think this is all this habitat can support. Of course they have also dispersed from the area. I continue working on my five-year report and will soon share some of my findings with you.

Ten days after returning from the survey, David and I began our journey to Trebon, Czech Republic for the VII International Otter Colloquium. (See separate articles). We took the train from Frankfurt to Prague to enjoy the countryside and get the 'flavor' of Germany and the Czech Republic, and then boarded the bus in Prague that took us to Trebon. During our bus journey we were able to converse with Paul Yoxon of IOSF, plus new people we met from Belgium. We arrived at our destination, got settled in our rooms, then attended the opening ceremonies. Although there were many different languages heard throughout the Colloquium, the official language of the Colloquium was English.

Paul Polechla, our Scientific Advisor, was actively involved in the Colloquium. As the North American representative for the IUCN Otter Specialist Group he gave his report of the overall status of our otters. He also gave a paper in a plenary session, co-chaired a session, and gave two poster presentations (with



Judy Berg

co-authors). One of his poster session co-authors was a new member of our board, Jan Reed-Smith, who also gave her own presentation. Jan works with river otters at the John Ball Zoological Garden in Grand Rapids, Michigan and has compiled a very informative Husbandry Notebook on the North American River Otter, which also includes an extensive bibliography. We welcome her to our board. David Berg gave a very warm presentation on the River Otter Alliance in which he also encouraged the international community to give ideas for our group and input to our Journal. Thanks to all of you!

I, too, gave a presentation on the diet of river otters in the upper Colorado River system from my research project. To me, as important as presenting was the opportunity to meet several young people just starting out in the world of wildlife research and giving them encouragement along with some 'words of wisdom.' For example, there was Christy from Belgium who is looking for an otter project in the wild, Tatsuo from Japan hoping someday to reintroduce otters in his country (they are near extinction), and Budsabong from Thailand, who is the only one in her country



surveying otters. Sharing research findings, networking with others and for others, encouraging others, and just lending a warm smile and a good ear are all important givings when a part of a grouping of such dedicated people.

Also at the Colloquium, I became reacquainted with Tom Serfass and met his lovely wife, Lisa. Tom was a part of the River Otter Symposium in 1994. He gave a presentation on the Pennsylvania reintroduction. He is also currently involved in the New York reintroduction and will write an article for a future Journal. We met another member of our group, Sheila Sykes, who gave a poster presentation on captive breeding of the giant river otter. She too will be writing an article for us. I think some of the international group will be giving input to our Journal also, since we gave out 80 River Otter Journals and received some positive responses. Many interesting Journals to come!

Following the Colloquium, David and I joined ten other participants from seven different countries for a tour of southern portions of the Czech Republic. We combined natural history with human history. We visited a bioserve, toured an otter rehabilitation center, took walks in nature under the expertise of two different and knowledgeable guides, and were guided through ancient buildings and castles. We found the people of the Czech Republic to be very accommodating to us foreigners and felt that they tried to make us feel comfortable.

To sum up my President's Message, the River Otter Survey was a success as was the VIIth International Otter Colloquium. Both will benefit the otters, which is what it is all about. Also, both can be beneficial to our group. Spring is the blossoming of the bud into the bloom of life. We of the River Otter Alliance hope this bloom of new life will be the case both for the otter and our group. I think it will be so. Now we ask for your support and your input on behalf of the otters. You Too Otter Make A Difference!

Judy Berg
President

Vllth International Otter Colloquium

by Judy Berg

The meeting of the IUCN Otter Specialist Group was held March 14-19, 1998 in Trebon, Czech Republic. Trebon is a protected landscape area in which the region has over 500 fishponds, many constructed in the Middle Ages. It is situated in the southern part of the Czech Republic and occupies an area of 700km².

The Colloquium was organized by the IUCN Otter Specialist Group, the Czech environmental organization ENVI and the German Aktion Fischotterschutz. There were 110 participants representing 34 countries. The organizing committee consisted of Padma de Silva, Chairperson IUCN Otter Specialist Group (O.S.G.); Claus Reuther, Aktion Fischotterschutz e.v. Chairperson European Section IUCN O.S.G.; Marie Prechalova, ENVI; Robert Dulfer, external co-operator with ENVI for the VII International Otter Colloquium; and Ales Toman, Czech representative IUCN O.S.G.



Guide Rolf Dulfer speaks to group at ponds area of Trebon.

Photo by Judy Berg

The topics covered included: Continental Reports; Otter Pathology and Morphological and Biochemical Aspects; Behavior, Social Structure, Reproduction and Captive Breeding; Diet, Predator Prey Relationships, and Damage to Fish Production; Population Ecology, Territoriality, Habitat Use, and Survey Methods; Mortality Factors and Their Control; and Conservation Aspects. Each Plenary session was followed by poster presentations on related subjects. Two evenings featured workshops and video presentations and on one evening we had regional meetings.

It was a very busy and intense Colloquium. However, we did have a field trip

one day in the ponds area where we found otter tracks and scat. This was followed by a visit to the castle at Cesky Krumlov. That evening we had a good meal in a nice restaurant. On the last evening we had the closing ceremony, a banquet with regional delights, followed by country folklore and dance. The proceedings will be published, expectedly by the end of the year.

If there are extra copies available, we will let you know the details of obtaining them.

I feel it was a successful and well-organized Colloquium. The presentations covered a wide variety of subjects. Also, very importantly, the presenters were not only able to share their findings, but also their concerns, their frustration, and their hopes for the future of otter species living in various parts of the world. There are many problems out there for the otters but there are also some dedicated people who are trying to solve those problems. To me this last sentence was the take home message. Yes, I am glad we attended!

Vllth International Otter Colloquium

by Paul Yoxon (Reprinted from *Otter News* with author's permission.)

Earlier this year, Paul Yoxon represented IOSF at the VIIth International Otter Colloquium in the Czech Republic and he found it a stimulating experience to meet with so many otter scientists and enthusiasts from all over the world. Here is a brief report from him:

In March 1998, over 100 delegates from around the world congregated at Trebon in the Czech Republic to discuss otters. While topics covered a range of subjects from vocalisation in Eurasian otters to the effect of PCB's on otters, I would like to extract just some of the important points from the conference.

Reports outlined the status of otters throughout the world and certain prob-

lems were reinforced for me, including the still unabated decline of all otters in the African continent, due principally to habitat degradation and pollution. In particular there has been a rapid decline in the Spotted Necked and Cape Clawless Otters in the last 15 years. Professor Jan Nel went on to tell us how the Eurasian otter is also declining from Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria and how there is a definite need for more work on otter-related problems in the African continent. Although conservation laws are in operation in many African countries, it is difficult to enforce them. Following discussions with Jan Nel we have decided to set up the programme outlined on the front of this Newsletter.

In the Asian continent, otters are now absent from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore and Japan, and little if nothing is known about the status and ecology of the Hairy Nosed Otter (*Lutra sumatrana*).

In Latin America once again there is a lack of information on the status of many species, especially in countries like Brazil, Paraguay, Ecuador and Peru, and little money is going into research and implementing conservation measures.

In North America, the situation is different with relatively healthy populations of the American River Otter; reintroduction programmes seem to be largely successful and 49 states show that the population is increasing. However, in many states they are still legally killed for fur and this is still a worry. In the last ten years the Sea Otter

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Otter Updates

by Tracy Johnston

● Volunteers and officials conducted the biannual river otter population survey in Rocky Mountain National Park, Colorado on February 28, 1998. Survey results showed seventeen otters using the area inside the park. The February 24, 1996 survey showed fifteen otters were using the area inside the park. This survey is part of follow up studies to measure the stability of the forty-one otters reintroduced to the park between 1978 and 1984.



Otter slide into snow-covered river, Rocky Mountain National Park.

Photo by Tracy Johnston

● Video tapes of Bob Landis' "Yellowstone Otters" — first broadcast on PBS in January 1998 — are now available for purchase, (see "Nature Program Features the River Otter," *River Otter Journal*, Fall 1997). To order, send \$19.95 + \$4.95 shipping and handling to Yellowstone Otters, P.O. Box 2284, South Burlington, VT 05407 or call 1-800-336-1917.

● Volunteers are assisting the Colorado Division of Wildlife with river otter population surveys in the North Park, Poudre, Laramie, South Platte and Middle Park areas beginning in June 1998. Contact Volunteer Coordinators Danielle Hosler, Northeast Region (ph: 970-472-4337) or Elaine Kehm, West Region (ph: 970-255-6145) for more information.

● The International Otter Survival Fund (IOSF) is planning a research project to be held May 15-26, 1999 on the occurrence and habitat requirements of the Cape Clawless Otter and Spotted-Necked Otter on the African continent. For information on this and other projects, contact IOSF at Broadford, Isle of Skye, Scotland. Ph/Fax: 01471 0822487. Email: iosf@aol.com.

● Colorado's Ocean Journey (COJ), a world-class aquarium, is currently under construction in Denver. Scheduled for

completion in mid-1999, COJ plans to house North American River Otters and orphaned sea otters.

● Associated Press reported the nation of Suriname declared one of the world's largest and most pristine tropical rain forests as a nature reserve on June 17, 1998. This follows Washington-based Conservation International's announcement of a \$1 million grant for the rain forest. Suriname's rain forests are home to Giant Otters, one of the world's most endangered animals.

Otter Sightings at Shadow Mountain Lake

by Deborah Mason

Editor's Note: Shadow Mountain Lake is located near Rocky Mountain National Park in Grand County, Colorado.

As we waited for our dinner to cook one evening at about 7:30 p.m., we took a drive near the "Hilltop" boat launch and fishing area at Shadow Mountain Lake. Just past the boat launch, my daughter Amanda thought she saw a dog crossing the frozen lake. I said it looked like a large member of the weasel family, since it had that short leg and long body bounce. As we went back for a better look, the animal came back into view and dropped into a slide. It was an otter! We were so excited, it was our first river otter sighting ever! As we watched, it ran and slid, ran and slid, ran and slid. It was headed toward Hilltop and the channel (between Shadow Mountain and Grand Lakes), so we started to go toward Hilltop. Just then, we saw a fox out on the ice looking toward the otter. Then the fox noticed us and he turned back and crossed the road.

We then went and parked at Hilltop, got out and watched the otter come closer and closer. It was still doing the run and slide. We could see its tail pop up into the air every time it hit the ice to slide. Then it found a patch of water and slid in. We watched a little longer, as it submerged, surfaced, and popped its head up. Suddenly Amanda noticed another otter headed our way. As it came toward us, it had its head up as if sniffing the air. The otter stopped, and then turned toward where the fox had been. Then after a very short distance, it returned to the original travel direction, run and slide, run and slide. As it approached the water where the first otter was, the first one popped out and

headed toward Hilltop and the shore. The second otter bypassed the open water and was following or chasing the first otter. When the first one got about 30 to 50 feet directly in front of us, it came ashore. We could hear its feet crunching the snow as it walked. It followed a ridge of remaining snow along the shoreline, then veered out through the dry cattails and into the water between the mainland and the island. Then it started swimming toward the island. The second otter came ashore, also crunching the snow as it walked. It followed where the first otter had gone, did a slide in the snow and followed through the cattails into the water.

As the first otter neared the island's shore it turned back toward the ice on Shadow Mountain Lake; the second otter turned, too. They went under water, then came up near the edge of the ice, then submerged again. They both came up on the ice, then down in another hole, then up on the ice again. Then they started to fight, wrestle or perhaps court. We could hear growling sounds at first, then high-pitched squealing or yipping sounds. For a moment they parted, one turned and started to go back toward the main body of the lake where they'd come from. Then just as we were starting to think it might have been a fight, that otter turned back and rejoined the other. They headed for the water and began swimming for the island. When they broke off from their "fight" the one who moved away headed for a crow that had landed on the ice a little way from the otters. When it was within 10 feet or so, the crow took off and the otter returned to the other otter. When the first one disappeared behind the island we decided it was time for our dinner.

Rehabilitating Hooch

by Melanie Haire

Editor's Note: Melanie Haire is responsible for three male Asian Small-Clawed Otters as Zoo Atlanta's otter keeper. She also rehabilitates North American River Otters when opportunities arise. This is the story of an otter Melanie rehabilitated out of her home.

I acquired "Chatahoochee" (or "Hooch" for short) in May 1994. Hooch was a ten to twelve week old North American River Otter. Although he still needed to be on milk, he was too afraid of me to let me feed him with a bottle. I mixed Esbilac puppy milk in with canned Maintenance Science Diet cat food and offered it to him in a bowl three times daily. Hooch ate well. By four months I weaned him off milk and fed him canned and dry cat food, Nebraska brand feline diet, and fresh fish from the river behind my house.

Hooch was afraid of water at first, so I offered him a small black tub to play in until he got brave enough to go under the water and let go of the sides with his back feet. Then I offered him a baby pool in his



"Hooch" in first tub of water.

Photo by Melanie Haire

enclosure and let him out once a day to play in a big baby pool and run around. Everyday I set fish traps in the river and brought him whatever was in the traps for his supper, which was usually catfish, crayfish and sunfish.

By the time Hooch outgrew the baby pool, we would walk to the river and have play/swim sessions in the "real thing." He never let me pick him up, so I had to develop enough trust with him so he'd fol-

low me down to the river and back again. (Plus, waving a minnow in his face didn't hurt either.)



"Hooch," playing with pecan (top) and taking a break from playing.

Photos by Melanie Haire

Hooch played fetch in the water with anything I could throw. He loved to play "chase" around the outside of his enclosure. He was catching his own fish in the river after about six months. At that time, he became reluctant to follow me home in the evenings. He then started spending nights out on the river. Soon he wouldn't even let me see him—just a splash and he was gone. I continued to provide back-up food in a bowl for about one month post release.

River Otter in Yellowstone National Park

Photo by Nathan Varley



North American River Otters: A Keeper's Perspective

by Jan Reed-Smith

Installment One: The Players

In 1992, I was introduced to my first river otter. I had always been fascinated with these entertaining creatures, but had never worked with them. In 1992 that changed. After an 11-year absence from the zoo field, I took a job as a zookeeper at the John Ball Zoo (JBZ). In addition to cats, bears and coyotes, my responsibilities included the care of a trio of river otters. Those three had me hooked within an hour! Active, curious, pleasing to look at; I knew I wanted to know them better and would be very happy in my new job.



Male Otter "Potter"

Photo by Jan Reed-Smith

The first eight months we spent getting to know each other. The male, a wild-caught nine-year-old stud now, was a mere three years old in 1992. Although we do not officially name the animals at our zoo, I began calling him "Potter." He was always putzing around and "Potter Otter" had more of a ring to it than "Putzer Otter."

Female #1 was an otter that had been orphaned in northern Michigan and hand-raised by a caring local resident. The local community had tried to reintroduce her to the lakes and rivers in her natal area, but she was too habituated to people. After a brief stint of frequenting the local businesses instead of staying in "her lake," she was caught and sent to our zoo. She was known as the Michigan otter, or "Micha" to me.



Female Otter "Minnesota"

Photo by Jan Reed-Smith

Female #2 was born at the Minnesota Zoo and mother-reared. As you may have guessed, she was known as the Minnesota otter, this I changed to "Minnesota" or "Minnie."

The two females did not get along, so they took turns spending the day with Potter on exhibit. Each animal was allowed time out at night when they were given access to their own night quarters.

It was fascinating getting to know the personalities and habits of these animals. Potter was easy-going and relatively timid. Minnie was bossy and definitely dominant. Micha was high-strung and still a little confused by what it took to relate to another otter. I fit into the equation as the house cleaner, food provider, exhibit decorator, plaything provider, and gradually, friend. As is common in the zookeeping field, I became a part of their world.

The dynamics of the JBZ otter exhibit were bound to change sooner or later, because that's the nature of working with living animals. This happened on April 20, 1993. As Minnie moved from one inside den to another, she sat down and began grooming her genital area. As I watched, trying to figure out if something was wrong, out pops a pup! Wow! We had hoped she was pregnant, but with an otter it is hard to tell. Their delayed implantation makes it even more difficult to predict a parturition date. I was just about ready to give up hope and there it was: a wigging, healthy otter pup.

I was ecstatic; she was calm. I quickly left to give her privacy and she went about the business of producing two more pups and moving them into one of the nest boxes we had furnished. The story of Minnie and her pups will have to wait for another issue, but I will say she proved to be an excellent mother and has just given birth to her third litter—two female pups—this April 22.



Pups about 45 days old inside nest den.

Photo by Jan Reed-Smith

As a result of our increased otter population, we decided to send Micha to the Minnesota Zoo, since they were searching for a female otter. (Micha, now named Rosetta, presently lives at the Denver Zoo. See "Denver Zoo Otter's Past Travel" article.) It was hard to see her go, but I knew she was going to a good facility. So, the players in this story are: Potter, still timid, but a proven stud and good father once Minnie decides he is allowed near the pups; Minnie, fierce mother of six boys and two girls now; and me, Jan, the otter-keeper.

European River Otter Born in U.S.

By Margit Deerman

As a keeper at Sun Bear Forest at the San Diego Zoo, I thought I would share with you our success in our first European otter born. As far as we know, this is the first European Otter to be born in the U.S.

On January 24, 1997, the only captive breeding pair of European Otters gave birth here at the San Diego Zoo. The pair came from the Zurich Zoo in 1992, when they were two years of age. They live nestled among the huge bear exhibits in a newly remodeled exhibit. Remodeled in 1994, the exhibit contains a large pool, about 40' x 20'. It is two feet at the deepest point and has a rock cave in the middle of the pool. A waterfall is to one side of the exhibit, and has a lot of logs for them to swim through, over, and climb on.

Towards the back of the exhibit, there is a bedroom to which they have access. We have a 4' x 7' nestbox made of recyclable plastic where they sleep all the time. We usually fill their nestbox with Bermuda hay, but sometimes we will use shavings. We also give the otters browse to play with and they usually will drag it to their bed. They are given enrichment every day, from palm fronds, fichus, crayfish, live goldfish, and boomer balls filled with fish scent. On occasion, they will also get different scents, including kelp, spices, cod liver oil, and other articles that will stimulate their senses.

The morning I found the pup, I was doing my morning checks and found mom and pup in the nestbox, with dad sleeping outside. We fixed him up a bed with hay in it so he would have a place to sleep outside the den in case mom didn't want him around. We kept a close eye on him to determine whether we needed to separate him from mom and pup, but no aggressive behavior was ever seen. In fact, he would

sometimes sleep right next to her and the pup. They were a good pair and always got along well, so we decided to keep them together. We drained the pool the first six weeks, giving the parents a tub of water that they climbed into to swim. We wanted to make sure the pup didn't drown in case something went wrong and it was dragged out into the exhibit. But all was well and at six weeks of age, we put one foot of water in the pool and mom would bring the pup out in the wee hours of the morning and before it got dark in the evening to teach it how to swim. The dad would be right there with them taking over at times. As time went on and we were sure the pup could swim, we filled the pool back up to the top, turned on the water falls, and watched him grow.

The pup is almost a year now, and is as big as the female. All three are doing well and can be seen in the mornings and evenings playing in the water. Being a part of these animals' daily lives is truly rewarding.

The River Otter Alliance

ENROLL NOW FOR 1998-99!

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:



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Complete and return this form with your 1998 membership check to:

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6733 S. Locust Court
Englewood, CO 80112

Vllth International Otter Colloquium

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population has steadily increased, but problems still exist with illegal poaching, pollution and fisheries conflicts.

In Europe, the Eurasian Otter seems to be doing better and a highway was stopped in Germany using the European wildlife laws of the Bern Convention and EU Habitats Directive. However, certain worrying rumblings came to the forefront with tentative plans to kill otters in both the Czech Republic and Austria because of conflicts between otters and fish ponds.

Two papers which fascinated me were presented by Dr. Koepfli and Drs. Gutleb and Leonards.

Dr. Koepfli, an IOSF member in USA, has done DNA work which showed that the

American River Otter (*Lutra canadensis*) is not in fact a "lutra-related" otter but a "lontra" and is more closely related to the Neotropical and Marine (Sea Cat) Otters of South America than to the Eurasian Otter. He also fascinated the audience by suggesting that the Giant Otter was not really related to all the other otters and may in fact not be a true otter at all! However, more work in this field will have to be done.

Dr. Leonards and Dr. Gutleb talked on environmental contaminants and looked at PCBs and the health of otters. They showed how certain PCBs are as toxic as dioxins and that with an increase in PCBs in the environment, there is an increase in disease in otters caused by a rapid decline in vitamin A in the body.

Overall the meeting was a tremendous source of inspiration and encouragement to forge the way forward for IOSF to make real progress in otter conservation, and we are confident that together with other workers we can make this a reality.

River Otter Alliance Board of Directors

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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

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INSIDE:

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



