

THE RIVER OTTER JOURNAL

Volume VIII, Number 1, Spring 1999



One of the three North American river otters now making a home at Colorado Ocean Journey.
Photo by Andy Cross, Courtesy of The Denver Post

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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 1999!

Colorado Ocean Journey Aquarium Features Three River Otters

By Carol Peterson

Visitors to Denver's new Ocean Journey aquarium will be treated to a river otter exhibit as part of the "Colorado River Journey" display. "Colorado River Journey" tells the story of the Colorado River from its headwaters at the Continental Divide to its discharge into the Sea of Cortez. The river otter exhibit will provide aquarium visitors with a glimpse of the otter's natural habitat found at the upstream portion of the Colorado River in Rocky Mountain National Park.

The exhibit, designed by the architectural firm Anderson, Mason and Dale, includes a beaver dam and waterfall—complete with native and introduced trout species—and is surrounded by aspen

trees and an osprey's nest. The playfully natured otters will likely be challenged trying to pursue and catch schools of fish within the exhibit.

Three male otters from the Bayou Otter Farm are scheduled to be on display when the exhibit opens in June 1999. (See article in Vol. 6, Spring 1997.) They include two orphaned eight-month-old brothers and another young pup.

Aquarium staff will oversee the otters' adjustment to their new surroundings, administer medical care as needed, and conduct three to four interactive "training sessions" daily. These activities will help keep the otters mentally and physically enriched and will also allow them to learn cooperative veterinary behaviors.

In preparation for the aquarium's opening, over 550 tour guides are now being trained. They will assist visitors in learning more about the elusive river otter; for example, how it is different from its distant cousin, the sea otter. To help observe these differences, an exhibit with two southern sea otters, a six-year-old male and two-year-old female, will be featured in a large open semi-circle exhibit.

While the Ocean Journey aquarium will not open until early summer, memberships are available now. For additional information call 303-561-4444 or write to the membership department at Colorado's Ocean Journey, US West Park, 700 Water Street, Denver, CO 80211.

President's Message



Judy Berg

Springtime in the Rockies is the time of year when Mother Nature fills our senses by treating us to her spectacular mixed media real-life production. The background for her stage is the majestic mountains, which are beginning to shed their coats of white, exposing rugged grays mixed with shades of green. The foreground presents the many species of flora which are springing forth from their winter sleep, preparing to explode into shades of yellows and greens and dotting this stage with bonnies of color. The breezes add to our senses for this production by picking up a variety of smells ranging from those of fresh pine to those of sugar-sweet flowers. Enter the waters, which flow across this stage in patterns of intense energy interspersed with quiet tranquillity. The sound is provided by the symphony of nature with the rains, the winds, and the waters accompanying the melodic voices of the avian chorus. All species of fauna play their role in this presentation. This is the time of year when young are being born, so many of the actors will be the newborns. Their performances are uninhibited and natural as they act on this stage of life. There is so much for them to explore and so much for them to learn, but, for now, their major role is to play and engage in light-hearted games. In fact, watching these young actors can bring forth the childlike nature in us all. Wouldn't we like to be a part of this production? Yes, I'm sure we would, since this special presentation from Mother Nature is what makes spring a favorite time of year!

Because our major interest is river otters, what is happening in their world? During this time of year, particularly from late March into early May, the river otters in the headwaters of the Colorado River are contributing to the balance of Mother Nature by bringing forth new life. The young (1 to 5, average of 2) are born after an 11 to 12 month gestation period (due to

delayed implantation). They are born blind and helpless. Their eyes open at about four weeks. The young remain in their natal den for 6 to 8 weeks. This same time period is also the time of mating. The female comes back into oestrous after giving birth. I have never been fortunate to see mating. I have also never been fortunate to see the

emergence of young from their natal den, but I know they must be some of the most playful actors in Mother Nature's production.

My two sightings of an adult otter with two youngsters occurred in September, when the young would have been about 4 or 5 months of age. I will share information from these observations with you in our fall issue. During the spring season, on 5 May, 1996, I did see an otter and found signs near this sighting. The animal was swimming in the waters of Arapaho Creek in porpoising or undulating movements. When the animal 'apparently' first detected me, it came up into a periscope posture and looked in my direction. When I had seen this posture on prior occasions the animal also emitted a snort sound. This sound and this posture had been seen by Claudio Gnoll in the European otters and its context

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.

was in response to humans. At the location where I was standing I found otter tracks and scat. The animal I saw may have been returning to this location, but I was in its path. On 7 May and 9 May I again found fresh otter tracks and in this same location. The tracks led from the waterway onto a sandy bank. They measured 3" wide by 3" long and were in the 4x4 pattern. The tracks indicated one otter. Although I will never know the sex or age of the otter, I will present to you the possibilities—it could have been an adult male, a juvenile of either sex, or an adult female with young still in the natal den. Males are usually solitary, particularly during the breeding season. Juveniles are dispersing from their mothers during this time period, especially if she has new offspring. Females with young must leave their natal den to forge each day. Although this behavior would normally occur at night, in an undisturbed area it could be at any time of day. I was the only human around in this area during this time of year. Whatever the case, sightings of river otters were an added bonus to my project!

I will continue to share information from my project on otters with you in the next issues of our Journal. Now I hope you will share your otter related experiences with us. Remember, input can be from the wild or from captivity, and from a few words to many. We all enjoy reading a variety of articles in our journal so please contribute. The deadline for the spring issue is 15 March and the deadline for the fall issue is 15 September. We do appreciate photographs and will credit the photographer and return the photos. We look forward to hearing from you. A large thank you goes to the J. Wade Kennedy Trust for its generous donation and to all of you who renewed your memberships for 1999. If you haven't done so, please don't forget to renew your annual memberships! Thank You!

The main goal of The River Otter Alliance and *The River Otter Journal* is education, so please share it with others. Education is a key component in preserving our wildlife heritage. The otters are counting on you! They want to continue to be a part of Mother Nature's production.

— Judy Berg, President

Otter Updates

By Tracy Johnston

• The Wildlife Rehabilitation Center and Otter Habitat cares for injured mammals—including river otters—and perching birds. It also houses non-releasable otters for the remainder of their lives. The Center was established 18 years ago by Barbara Gregory and is licensed by the Pennsylvania Game Commission and the U.S. Government. All funding for the approximate six hundred animals that pass through the facility annually is through private donations, membership fees, educational talks, and tours. For more information, contact Barbara Gregory, Wildlife Rehabilitation Center and Otter Habitat, 515 Sipe Road, York Haven, PA 17370; phone: 717-938-4040; fax: 717-938-8231.

• Results from the Colorado Division of Wildlife river otter population survey from summer 1998 to winter 1999 included the following:

- Otter tracks were reported along the Canadian River, the North Fork of the Michigan River, and at Cottonwood State Wildlife Area along the South Platte River.
- Otter scat and crayfish remains were sighted at the confluence of Willow Creek and Willow Creek Reservoir.
- Otter sightings were reported along the Michigan River, at the Ranger Lakes Campground, and Willow Creek and Windy Gap Reservoirs.

• Four river otters at Flamingo Gardens in Davie, Florida, were the subject of an intense controversy this spring after one of the otters bit the finger of 17-month-old Rachael Gold when she put it into the animals' cage. Rather than have Rachael undergo the regimen of five rabies shots unnecessarily, the parents asked that the animal first be tested for the disease. Since it was not clear which animal bit Rachael, all four otters would have had to be tested for rabies. The rabies test requires the animals be killed.

The controversy was fueled by the fact that the child's mother had left the public area, pushed Rachael's stroller up to the fence surrounding the otter display, and allowed her to place her fingers into the cage. According to animal director Michael Ruggieri, "The parents went off the beaten path and went to the side...where only employees are allowed. The mom pushed the baby right up to the wire." Following protests from animal lovers who felt the parents were negligent and were furious the four otters faced death, the family decided to let Rachael undergo the rabies shots without first testing the animals.

• Recent reports show the California sea otter population is declining at an alarming rate. After an all-time high of approximately 2,377 in 1995, the sea otter population in California is now estimated to be only 1,937. If the trend continues, the California sea otter may again be placed on the endangered species list. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service currently estimates 1,850 is the smallest number of California sea otters required to maintain a sustainable population. Reasons for the decline in the number of otters are thought to be from infectious disease, water contaminants, fish nets and fishing pots, natural predators, starvation and speedboats.



"Emmit" (top) and "Lori B" (below) from the Wildlife Rehabilitation Center and Otter Habitat

Photos by Barbara Gregory



On the Trail of the Common Otter... The European Connection

By Paul J. Polecchia Jr.

Our spring in the Great American Southwest has been anything but common. Here in New Mexico we have had the driest February on record, but the wettest March on record. The heavy thundershowers coupled with the blustery winds reminded me of last March in Trebon, Czech Republic, Central Europe...site of the VII International Otter Colloquium. ENVI, the Czech environmental organization, hosted the gathering (lead by Robert Dulfer) with the assistance of Aktion Fishotterschutz e.V. (from Germany) and the worldwide IUCN Otter Specialist Group. The purpose of this meeting, held every four years or so, was to bring interested people together to discuss otter biology and conservation. The meeting focused on the sustainable use of wetlands by man.

After stimulating and interesting presentations and informal talk, Ales Toman, a Czech biologist and member of the Otter Specialist Group, lead us on a field trip to see first-hand some of the wetland management techniques previously discussed. This region in Southern Bohemia is renowned for its carp-rearing ponds. They are serious about their native carp since they have over 500 ponds along the Luznice River, built in the Middle Ages, occupying over 7,200 hectares. In the skilled hands of a Czech chef at a banquet of dishes of native cuisine, we discovered that the carp has been elevated to the level of a delicacy.

The Trebon Protected Landscape Area is much more than carp ponds. It is actually a mosaic of life-giving wetlands; spongy peat bogs, moist grasslands, riparian forests of willow, alder, and massive oaks (*Quercus robur*), marshes lined with common reeds and cattails, crowned with

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River Otters: Training's Ultimate Challenge

By Kurt Butkiewicz
President, The Otter Limits Association

As I walked across the back-up area where our animals are housed, Tori was walking alongside as well as any obedience-trained dog. Suddenly she stopped, crouched low to the ground, then was gone like a shot back into her kennel area. About 15 seconds later I heard the rumble of a large truck passing outside our building.

Was it the sound of the truck, or maybe the vibrations it caused on the ground that alerted Tori something unusual was coming? Could it have been a smell or even something else Tori sensed to which I was unaware? Whatever sense was disturbed, she responded without hesitation to avoid this potential threat.

Scenarios as described above are common when working with river otters, and Tori was simply acting in an expected manner. She was a 2-year-old river otter that had been brought into my facility's care from an area that was being torn up by a housing development. She was accustomed to doing whatever it took to survive, and these instincts took precedence over walking with some strange human creature.

Trying to avoid this sort of occurrence, I quickly became more in tune with my surroundings. I began to take notice of lighting adjustments, strange sounds, odd smells, rare objects in view; anything that was unusual or different. This allowed me to better prepare the area for the otter to be comfortable, or to expect problems and be prepared to work through them.



Photo by Kurt Butkiewicz

Still, as prepared as I tried to be, it was common for the otters I worked with to have me spinning in place, wondering what they sensed and how to accomplish my objectives involving them. When I first experienced this I realized that the river otter might well be training's ultimate challenge.

Otters must be alert to survive. They are therefore hesitant by nature. They will notice and respond to anything that stimulates their senses. If a threat is suspected, they will avoid it. As much as I prepared my area for Tori, there was always something that startled her or grabbed her interest. The fix was not to keep the area from changing, this was impossible. Instead, the need was to desensitize her to change; to teach Tori that new situations were okay and to increase her trust in me.

To overcome an otter's hesitancy toward anything; objects, noise, smells, people, anything at all, two methods of desensitization are most effective. Encouraging the otter to confront its fears is usually tried first. Calling it toward the disruptive object/person or working with it during an obviously noisy or smelly episode allows the otter to become comfortable that no true threat exists. If the otter demonstrates a trust that brings it to face its fear even slowly, it can be rein-

forced for each positive step and thus learn that accepting change is very rewarding. If taking this approach, it is important to pace the process appropriately per scenario. Moving too quickly or too slowly can in turn make the otter even more sensitive and further complicate the situation. The other method is to work as if the suspected distraction doesn't exist and, therefore, neither does a reason for the otter to behave differently in its presence. Reinforcing gradual steps of acceptance as the otter ignores the earlier cause of distress will allow it to eventually stay focused as desired.

Overcoming an otter's hesitancy does have one downfall; it seems to even further increase their curiosity. Instead of fearing something, they are compelled to explore it. This can only be overcome by staying one step ahead of the otter, sometimes literally. By moving fast enough and thinking ahead, getting past possible distractions before the otter reacts to them, they will focus strongly on the trainer while just trying to keep up.

While curiosity may present this challenge, it also reaps rewards. Following their curiosity, otters are more likely to tackle training projects head on. Fears of going through tunnels or into kennels, approaching guests, or fleeing at the slightest sound are overcome. Facing

new situations also brings out new and creative behavioral responses. Unique capabilities and original ideas of what to train can be discovered simply by observing an otter as they conquer each new endeavor.

The extremes of hesitancy and curiosity encountered with otters bring the training process to a new level. These characteristics can be the cause of absolute frustration or be taken advantage of for training purposes. The most important thing to remember as a trainer is that the otter is not behaving in a spiteful manner, but in accordance to their needs, thoughts, urges, or desires. They act and react to the basics of life. To keep up, a trainer must always remember to apply the basics of behavioral modification.

When training any animal, communication must be concise and clear. Due to the otter's short attention span, gaining their focus is the first concern. Feeling ready, behavioral cues can be given by verbal, visual, or tactile means. To assist with getting and holding an otter's attention, it is effective to combine two or more types of signals. Stimulating more of their senses this way further increases the likelihood of a response.

Clearly receiving their cue, the otter should perform the correct behavior to an



Photo by Kurt Butkovic

acceptable level of criteria. Meeting expectations, they have earned a reward. To maintain effectiveness, reinforcements should be varied when working with otters. Gauging the reinforcement to match the objectives of a session is also important. If the otter allows it, tactile reinforcement is useful because it can be delivered without lengthy impact on the session. Food is useful, and while small bits allow the session to continue, larger amounts may end a session but have greater impact on the otter repeating its performance. Creative reinforcements

such as towels, ice, warm water, and toys increase variability options, but must also be timed to not interfere with further plans.

Reinforcement variability is often challenging during public programming due to a need to keep pace with the presentation. To alleviate the need to continually reinforce each step of the same routine, trainers often develop behavioral patterns. Patterning allows the otter to aim ahead to their next goal, and also prevents the need to desensitize them to continuous changes that would otherwise occur.

Of course, training does not only occur to meet public presentation needs. It can also be utilized for reasons such as research applications, educational purposes, to assist with breeding efforts, and for husbandry practices. Some behaviors commonly trained for these uses include: picking up the otter, kenneling, detailed physical exams (eyes, ears, mouth, abdominal palpitations), anal cultures, vaginal cultures, urine sample collection, blood draws, skin scrapings, growth measurements, and simply standing on a scale to monitor weight fluctuations.

Considering all of the practical applications of training an otter, it is certainly worth all of the challenges it presents. Besides being useful, it also allows for enriching time to be spent with an otter, and this is something that should always be cherished and enjoyed.



Photo by Kurt Butkovic

Winter Tales

By Bob Arenbeck

Editor's Note: Wellesley Island is located in the St. Lawrence River, approximately 20 miles east of Lake Ontario.

Nothing changes more after a freeze than the ponds in the swamps. The heron, osprey and kingfisher are suddenly scarce; no doubt leaving the swamps of Wellesley Island to fish in the nearby St. Lawrence River, which won't freeze for another

month. The frogs disappear into the mud. Only the diving beetles keep banging their snouts on the bottom of the ice until they find air pockets to fuel another plunge into the depths. For the past two years, the first major freezes coincided with a snowfall, so I saw how the otters I had been watching since the late summer reacted to nature's new dispensation. Otters seem to be quirky animals, so I wasn't surprised that each winter's tale played out differently.

I doubt if I will ever have the excellent "otter watching" I had during the summer and fall of 1997. At a ten- to fifteen-acre

pond formed by a 300-foot long beaver dam, a mother and three pups entertained me during all hours of the day. Although I all but sang along to their snorting, barks and occasional screeching at a nosy beaver, the sound track of my video tape of them will be a Mozart flute quartet, such were their sprightly bobbing, elegant diving and high-spirited displays as they engorged on bullheads. Even their sinuous nuzzling atop a beaver lodge in the afternoon sun had the quality of a Mozart adagio, until one of the pups skirted up to the top of the lodge and let fly with all the grace of Seinfeld's buddy, Kramer.

When the freeze struck in mid-November, I looked forward to what I saw the year before—otters popping up with ice bonnets showing off their catch of the day. Instead, I found four otter troughs leaving the pond, going up and down a ridge and into a bay of the St. Lawrence. For the next week there was one unhappy tracker on Wellesley Island. The beavers in the ponds soon conquered the freeze and had several holes in the ice, but no otter troughs led to the seafood buffet below. My wife tried to argue me out of my blues, insisting that these otters might have gone into the river any night, not just the night after the snowfall. I insisted there had been a fundamental change.

A few days later, with my jaws set for disappointment, I walked up to the pond after ascertaining once again that no troughs came up to it from the bay. Then there they were, diving into a hole in the ice then bringing up fish, slapping them on the counter, if you will, and then gargling them down the hatch. However all was not the same. There were only two. I brought my wife out the next day, and they were there again. She saw in an instant that the charming scene of mother's love had ended, and the battle of the sexes had begun. How else interpret the vain displays of the larger otter and the sensibility of the smaller who kept a wary eye on us and finally convinced "Mr. Show Off" that they best move on. I only saw them a few more times. Then, when the deep freeze came in December, they left sporadic signs in several of the ponds in the area and on the river ice in the bay as they scooted around to find open water.

This summer, otter watching was hardly a pastime. I got brief glimpses of two otters. I saw enough to persuade me that it was a mother with a not-very-active pup. Unlike last year's four, these two seemed to avoid the beavers, keeping to a beaver-less pond up stream. So quiet were these two that I

The End of the World

by Eleanor B. Heady
Folk Tales of the Nimpipoo

One autumn in the time of the animal kingdom, Itsayaya, the coyote, set out on a journey just as the aspens turned to gold. He wanted to get a supply of ripe choke cherries to dry for the winter. Wonderful fruit. Always grew just toward the little stream that emptied into the Roaring Snake River. Along the river bank, not far from where Roaring Creek empties into the Snake, lived the Kilosks, the otter and his wife. Now in those long ago days, the otters lived on dry land, not in the water as they do today. They built their homes in the banks of the rivers and creeks and only went into the water if they had to catch a fish.

As Itsayaya came to the camp of the otters, he saw a huge rack of crayfish drying in the sun. Itsayaya loved crayfish. He licked his lips as the delicious odor drifted toward him. He called to the otters, "Hey there, otter! You have a fine lot of crayfish." "Yes," said otter, "we have worked hard for many moons to get enough for the winter."

Itsayaya looked longingly at the drying fish. "I'm going up for choke cherries up by Lapwal Creek where the best fruit in these mountains is ripe right now," he said. "I'll pick enough for you and your wife and trade them to you for some of your crayfish."

Kilosk, the otter, flipped his tail and laughed. "Ho, ho! What a joke! We otters never eat chokecherries. Once my great-grandfather tried some and got a most painful stomach ache."

Itsayaya sat down near the drying rack. The crayfish smell was nearly driving him mad with hunger. "Please, Kilosk," he pleaded, "maybe the choke cherries wouldn't hurt you."

"No, no, no! I will not eat chokecherries. My wife will not eat them. Otters never eat choke cherries," shouted Kilosk, the otter.

Itsayaya turned away and trotted up the river, but he could not forget those crayfish. As he hurried along, he thought of another scheme. He turned around and ran back to the otter's camp. "Kilosk," called Itsayaya, "I have a big, cozy lodge in Siminikum. Why don't you both come and live with me?"

"And why should we do that?" asked the otter.

"We would have happy times there," said Itsayaya.

"Oh, yes, especially if we brought our winter food stores," said Kilosk's wife. "Go on, Itsayaya. My husband and I will stay here with our crayfish."

So once again Itsayaya, the coyote, left the otter's camp.

As he traveled up the Roaring River, the coyote could think of nothing but those delicious crayfish drying in the sun. Finally, when he could stand it no longer, he thought of another scheme. He turned around and ran back downstream.

"Run for your lives!" he shouted. "Hurry! The end of the world is coming. Run! Hide!"

The otters were terrified when they heard Itsayaya's cries. "Quick, let's dive into the water," cried Kilosk. "Maybe we'll be safe there."

So the otters dived into the deep river, where they live to this day, waiting for the end of the world that has never come.

Itsayaya, the coyote, rushed to the drying rack, stuffed his knapsack with crayfish, and trotted off down the river to his lodge. And all otters still have trouble with the wily coyote who still tries hard to share in the fish that they catch.

— Contributed by John Mulvihill

announced to my family that I would devote my winter to the beavers. (Hard lines for an otter-lover to say.) Indeed, they took advantage of the warm December to lumber extensively and gnaw contentedly into the night as I loafed on warm granite nearby.

Then the freeze came and it was that kind of hard, vengeful, and thick ice freeze you get in late December, the real start of brutal winter. I assumed that, like last year, the otters would flee to the open river—which itself was rapidly freezing up—and then perhaps come back to the ponds when the beavers or a thaw had reopened parts of the ponds. Sure enough, after the post-freeze snowfall, I tracked the otters out of their pond. However, they went no further than the pond the beavers were in. The active beavers had managed to keep a small patch of open water at the dam, but I knew from the sub-zero forecast for the week ahead that it wouldn't be open for long.

In the spring of 1995, I happened upon a huge breach in this dam. At first I blamed an insane trapper, but there were no human signs. Then I blamed the beavers themselves, but the hole was well off center and useless to them. That left the otters, and an

article in *Natural History* magazine alluded to phenomena. The next winter I saw holes just after they were made and determined by scats and troughs that the otters were most likely the engineers. But I did not see a hole like the gaping one I saw in the spring of 1995.

To my astonishment, these two otters that I almost thought beneath notice breached the beaver dam (while the beavers shifted into low gear and dozed inside their warm lodge), keeping holes in the ice open above and below the dam. They periodically left a festive display of fish heads at these holes at the dam, as well as around holes at their den. They spread their scats in some nearby rocks 100 feet away. One warm morning in late January, I saw an otter come out and add to a scat pile already six inches high.

I won't see the true extent of this winter's otter engineering until the thaw. The hole in the dam is at least three and one-half by two feet, and perhaps more because the beavers began using it a month after its construction as a convenient way to get between ponds. Because of the beaver traffic, the otter fashioned another hole nearby,

as high as the other but a little bit narrower. While the initial breaching of the dam may have been a desperate reaction to keep water flowing in the pond so that it would not freeze shut, the advantages of making a large hole soon became apparent. Bullheads and pickerel seemed to have been attracted to the flow. As the pond water level went down the otters could catch air under ice, even swim below me and try to snort me out of the pond. Then when the ice collapsed in the center of the pond, large galleries opened up along the shore between the old ice above and the new ice below. As I learned by poking around with my walking stick, it was easy to keep the ice below open. Finally when the pond lowered to almost the level of the pond below the otters could go from pond to pond without going over the dam. Not that they really needed that as they had innumerable tunnels through the snow into various small holes into and through the upper portion of the dam.

Of course, when the snow and ice melt away, the dam will be useless. Not that the otters will worry—the beavers will fix that!

The River Otter Alliance

ENROLL NOW FOR 1999-2000!

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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The European Connection

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spruce and common beech hills. Though they have lost some of the mega-fauna like the European Winstent, this region is still home to the native White-tailed Eagle (close relative to the American Bald Eagle), Great cormorant, black-crowned night heron, and waterfowl like geese, mallards, and goldeneyes. Growing up in the eastern deciduous forest of the U.S., it was like a "Biology 101" class field trip. We were seeing Holarctic flora and fauna and their ecological equivalents...plant and animal species that live on both sides of the Atlantic or that have close cousins on the other side of the "Big Water."

The group still wanted to see signs of their target animal, though, so our trusty guide Ales made a beeline to a canal in Přírodní Reservace (Reserve) where we whiffed the slightly musky...slightly sweet

fragrance of a Common or Eurasian otter (*Lutra lutra*) scat, or "spraint" as they call it in British English. We continued on by bus to the Rybarký Revír (River) about 8 kilometers northwest of Trebon. This particular river had a meandering braided channel. Several of us jumped into the river and waded onto a sandbar. Here to our excitement we found the characteristic 5-toed, webbed, clawed track (or seal) of the endangered Eurasian otter! It seemed like it was *deja vu* all over again. If I didn't know I was in Europe, I could have been in the wetland haunts of our Nearctic/American/Canadian river otter (*Lontra canadensis*)...right down to the details of the black color of the scat and the crawfish parts and fish scales it contained. We continued trailing otters late into the afternoon before quenching our thirst with some fine Bohemian beers. Over a few cold ones, we ruminated on our good fortune. On a post-conference tour, a few people were lucky enough to see a mother otter, with her pup! I went home thoroughly inspired.

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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

6733 South Locust Court
Englewood, Colorado 80112

INSIDE:

*The Spring 1999 update on
river otter sightings, research news,
and interesting stories!*

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