

THE RIVER OTTER JOURNAL

Volume VI, Number 1, Spring 1997



Lee Roy Sevin and Otter
Photo courtesy of Bayou Otter Farm

Bayou Otter Farm

By Carol Peterson

Diane and Lee Roy Sevin have been working on their otter farm in Theriot, Louisiana for over 30 years. They are one of the major suppliers of river otters for reintroduction programs, zoos and parks. When I spoke with Diane, she amazed me with her schedule. She had just fed the six pups currently in her charge their second out of three meals a day. She had also given them bottles in between their feedings. Diane prepares the mixture of baby food meat (veal is a favorite), rice cereal, soy milk and cod liver oil. She has cared for 20 pups this year. The pups come from captured females that bred in the wild and gave birth in captivity. When the pups are five

weeks old, Diane starts feeding them bottled formula while they are still nursing. This allows them to make the transition to a bottle over a two week period of time.

In addition to raising the pups, the Sevins care for an average of 250 river otters per year. They once had 500 otters during a peak year about five years ago. Trappers catch the otters during

trapping season from mid-November to mid-March. They use a weak setting on a modified leg hold trap which usually catches the otters by a toe. They are generally not harmed, although Diane said some otters do occasionally lose a toe. Otter hides currently sell for \$10-\$15 each, however trappers can sell live otters to the Bayou Otter Farm for \$100 each. This gives a great incentive for trappers to capture live, healthy otters to sell to the Sevins. Some trappers have even told them they can no longer kill otters after handling them and learning how intelligent and personable they are.

Diane estimated that 75% of the captive otters—which they resell for \$400 each—are purchased for state and private reintroduction programs. Typically an order for 100 otters would be 40% female and 60% male, to replicate otter percentages in the wild. They sell all ages of otters for restocking. This year, 75 otters went to Indiana, 100 went to Illinois, and 25 went to Iowa nature centers. Some of the state reintroduction programs for which the Bayou Otter Farm has provided otters include Kentucky, Tennessee, and Pennsylvania.

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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 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

This message comes to you courtesy of my spending some 'Springtime in the Rockies.' What an interesting time of the year—with snow falling one day, then sunny clear blue skies the next. And, oh, the river! While snow still blankets the ground, mother nature begins to send her winter bounties into the river to give her more of life's flow. Every day on the river can be a new visual and audible experience. Then, of course, with the melting of winter's snow from under the surface crust, there can be new physical experiences too. Snowshoe-leg lifts can be fun...well, that depends on your idea of fun!

Oh, to be an otter. They slide on the banks and swim and float in the waters of this new found season. To them, this is a time of jubilation—winter is ending! During this special season in our climate, it is a time for otters to meet and mate and to raise the young from last spring's successful mating. Because the North American river otter has up to a 12 month gestation due to delayed implantation, and since the female comes back into oestrous shortly after giving birth, it is possible for her to be raising young and also engage in mating during the same season.

For my own research project, I've been documenting otter signs that tell us they've been there and collecting otter scat for diet analysis. Yes, another year of research has begun. I'm also working on a five year report and exploring some educational efforts, both of whose results will be shared with you over time in coming issues of the journal. This sharing is what we of the River Otter Alliance are hoping you will also do with all us "otter people."

For people doing research on otters, The River Otter Journal will provide you with an outlet to share your findings, your questions, your experiences. It is a means to come together with other interested people. People who work directly with



Judy Berg

otters as keepers or rehabilitators must have interesting information and experiences to share. Very few of us have "hands on" experiences; let us learn and enjoy through yours. Did any of you try tracking otters? We would like to know what you saw and your experiences. What about those of you who have seen otters in the wild? What and where did you observe them? Photographers, we like pictures of otters in our journal, so please help us out. Photos will be returned, and you will be given photo credit in the publication.

When sending us information, you can write from a few lines to many. The possibilities are endless! Remember, in addition to sharing your information with us, teachers can use the information to help educate the future generation of "otter people." We look forward to your input.

Thanks to those of you who became members! We received a good response and the 'otters appreciated it.' We look forward to "otters" of you joining us. The more members we get, the more we can do for these special animals. *You Otter Make a Difference!*

— Judy Berg, President

Otter Tracks In Sand and Snow
Photos by Judy Berg





Little Mama and Pup
Photo by Scott Shannon

Report from Trinidad Bay

by J. Scott Shannon

Since 1983, I've observed a population of wild river otters at Trinidad Bay, California. Here, over the last 14 years, I have seen wild otters more than 2,500 times. My work now comprises the longest on-going observational study of any population of North American Carnivora. The purposes of my observations have been to understand the social behavior of these otters, and to trace the lives of individual wild otters over years and generations. If a pup is born this spring, it will be the 40th otter whose birth I have recorded, and a member of the 5th generation of otters I've observed here.

The present matriarch at Trinidad Bay is Little Mama, who was born in 1991. She is the last surviving granddaughter of the previous matriarch of the population, who died in 1992. In 1995, Little Mama gave birth to two daughters, who are still living with their mother even though they are both adults now. The old matriarch also had two elder daughters who stayed with their mother well into adulthood, even after these daughters had young of their own. I expect that the two adult daughters who presently live with their mother here will do likewise.

My study site might just be the most ideal place in the world to observe wild otters. At Trinidad Bay, otters can be seen almost every day, and at very close distances (I've had otters walk over my feet). I've watched otters from the day of their first swimming lessons grow to become mothers themselves...and seen them die right before my eyes. I've even heard an otter cry. Observing the daily life of these remarkable animals over years and generations has truly been the greatest privilege of my life.

Bayou Otter Farm

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among others. Diane even flew to Pennsylvania—accompanied by two pups in a pet carrier—to help raise funds for that state's reintroduction program.

When the otters are brought to the Farm during trapping season, the Sevins' challenge is to keep them fit and healthy until they are moved to their new introduction sites. Only a few individuals refuse to eat, as they can usually be enticed by ground raw meat or Nutria, in addition to a diet of cereal, eggs, grated carrots, Purina Growth Start for chicks, and cod liver oil (to give the flavor of fish). They are all given a modified inoculation for both feline and canine distemper.

Otter Limerick

by John Mulvihill

*Have you seen a true otter slide
It's a foot, or a little less wide
When it has enough zip
Otters cry, "let 'er rip!"
What fun to gain speed on the ride*

*We've noticed, on otters that glide
A smile that whiskers can't hide
A spirit of fun
Warm and bright like the sun
Celebration of life, done with pride*

*But we've also heard otters that cried
Caught in traps, no escape though
they've tried*

*Need for fur, we might blame
But it still seems a shame
The loss of a joy that has died*



Usually the otters are kept in separate cages. Females tend to like to be more solitary, however males seem to enjoy companionship and are sometimes put together.

The Sevins even had a favorite male for nine years named "Bougalee," aptly named for the mischievous rascal that he was. Otters have been known to live up to 20 years in captivity, however they are susceptible to kidney stones.

Diane and Lee Roy, with the assistance of their son Tom, have made a major contribution to the reintroduction of the river otter to its previous habitats across the United States. Their devotion will be difficult to replace, and is greatly appreciated by all who support the return of the North American river otter.

International Otter Survival Fund

by Grace Yoxon

For many people their first introduction to otters was through such literary classics as Gavin Maxwell's *Ring of Bright Water* or Henry Williamson's *Tarka the Otter*. The word "otter" conjures up an image of a mischievous and playful animal but one which is hard to see in the wild. However, although otters in the world are probably more protected today than they have ever been, they are still in more trouble now than they were 50 years ago.

The International Otter Survival Fund (IOSF) works to conserve and protect all species of otter worldwide. Of the thirteen species of otters in the world, eight of these are classified as "endangered" and the others as "vulnerable." In Britain, our native species is the Eurasian Otter (*Lutra lutra*). It has disappeared over a vast part of its former range, and this has happened largely within the last fifty years.

It is quite ironic that if you shot or trapped an otter in the UK, you would be in contravention of the Wildlife and Countryside Act, the Bern Convention, and the EEC Habitats Directive. Yet if you kill a lot of otters by destroying their home and habitat, then this law would not necessarily apply and a convenient loophole would emerge to enable you to get away with it. IOSF sees the destruction of habitat as one of the most worrying aspects of otter conservation as we approach the millennium. But the conservation of the otter is not simply conservation of just another species. As a predator, the otter has a wide distribution both in terms of area and different habitat types. At the very top of the aquatic food chain, the otter is highly sensitive to any form of disturbance, pollution or destruction of habitat. This sensitivity makes it a good indicator species for the status of the environment.



European Otter

Photo by David Berg

IOSF is working both at home and abroad. We already have a network of people working with otters around the world including Latvia, Lithuania, Russia, Ukraine, Chile, Portugal, Germany, France, India, Turkey, and of course our friends in the River Otter Alliance. This collaboration—both locally and worldwide—is vital if we are to conserve otters in the long term. There are three main tasks for IOSF: to create an awareness of otters and threats to them through education and practical projects; to finance research into habitat and population studies and general otter conservation; and to support individual rescue and rehabilitation centers for otters.

In 1993, we set up our otter treatment and rehabilitation center on the Isle of

Skye. Here we care for otters in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. Cubs are generally received at the Center at 7-12 weeks old, although the majority are about 12 weeks old and weigh about 2 kg for males and about 1.5 kg for females. They may become separated from their mother as a result of her death or possibly because of harsh weather or flooding. A young male cub recently cared for at the Center was washed away from his mother in a flood which claimed the life of his sister; he was just three months old. He has now been released back to his native island of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides.

In the wild, Eurasian otters stay with their mum for between 13-15 months. Therefore the logical time to put them back would be at this stage. However the biggest rate of mortality in the wild occurs at dispersion. As on most occasions, this is during the winter months when conditions are obviously harder for a young one starting out on its own. It is therefore better to release them the following spring, when they will be about 16-18 months old. The otters are then released into a warmer environment and it will only be about 6 months until they are sexually mature.

We also have an on-going research project to look at the way in which the Eurasian otter exploits different coastal zones. By providing such a method of

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Otter at Denver Zoo, eating fish
Photo by David Berg

Otter Updates

by Tracy Johnston

- The Spring 1997 **INSIDER'S REPORT** from the Zoological Society of San Diego reported a new European otter (*Lutra lutra*) pup was recently born at the zoo. The report says:

"The only pair of European otters in the US recently gave birth to the first pup in the USA! Mom and her pup will be in their nest bedroom until the end of March. You may be able to watch mom teach her pup how to swim, find food and other behaviors needed to survive. Pups are with their mother for about a year."

- The Denver Zoo may be expecting otter pups! Female North American river otter (*Lutra canadensis*) Rosetta has undergone a dramatic behavior change in the last few months, leading experts to believe she may be pregnant. She has become aggressive to her keepers and mate, Rataxis. Keepers have moved the male off display to allow her to nest, if she wishes. ROA President and

Zoologist Judy Berg has been an information liaison between the Denver Zoo and the San Diego Zoo, since the latter just experienced a successful otter birth (see above).

- ROA President Judy Berg will be giving a lecture on river otters at Rocky Mountain Park's Kawuneeche Visitor's Center at 7:00 p.m. on June 28, 1997. We'd love to see you there!

- Fifty river otters were released into the Patoka River in southern Indiana this January. A total of 100 otters have been released in the state since 1995, as part of an on-going reintroduction program.

- The European otter (*Lutra lutra*) is the topic of Dr. Hans Kruuk's Wild Otters: Predation and Populations book from Oxford University Press. The author is on staff at the Institute of Terrestrial Ecology in Banchory, Scotland. He states the European otter is quite similar to the North American river otter in many ways, (with the important difference of delayed implantation of the latter species). The book is

a highly technical, in depth summary of a scientific research study Kruuk conducted on the Lunna Ness peninsula, on the north-east coast of the Scottish island of Shetland. It discusses the population, habitat, social behavior, and diet of Shetland's otters. Although the author warns against the extrapolation of this study's results to other habitats of the European otter or to other species of otters, it can be the source of hypotheses to be tested elsewhere. Kruuk feels his research is especially relevant to the two North American species of otter, because they sometimes (river otter, *Lutra canadensis*) or always (sea otter, *Enhydra lutra*) live in a marine habitat.

- The River Otter Alliance has started a database to track facilities around the world where ambassadors of the various species of otters can be viewed by interested parties when they are in the area. Please let us know the location name, address, phone number, and type of species kept at any facilities you know about. We will publish the list in an upcoming newsletter.

Thirteen Otter Species

by Tracy Johnston

It appears otters have been a distinct race for a very long time; its ancestor, *Lutra licenti* has been traced to the late Miocene. Some records indicate the earliest recognizably aquatic otter fossil on record lived approximately 30 million years ago. The result of this long history is reflected in the thirteen species of otter currently found worldwide. The otter apparently moved into the New World 1.7 to 1.8 million years ago. Fossils in North America are found primarily in the East and the deep South. The otter historically ranged over much of North America, north of Mexico. The English

name "otter" comes from the ancient Greek word *hydor*, meaning water.

All otters belong to the group of *Carnivora* called *Mustellidae*. Most studies group otters alive today into thirteen species with four genera: *Lutra*, *Pteronura*, *Aonyx*, and *Enhydra*. However, current opinion favors placing three species of *Lutra* otters—the African spotted-necked otter, the Indian smooth-coated otter, and the North American river otter—into genera of their own, *Hydrictis*, *Lutrogale*, and *Lontra* respectively. Some species of otter lives on every continent of the world, with the exception of Australia and Antarctica. There are two species of otter native to North America: the river otter and the sea otter. The North American river otter was given the Latin name *Mustela lutra canadensis* by Schreber in 1776, and *Lutra canadensis* by Sabine in 1823.



Asian Small-Clawed Otters at San Diego Zoo

Photos by Chris Wittbrodt

THE THIRTEEN SPECIES OF OTTER:

1. African Spotted-Necked Otter (*Lutra* or *Hydrictis maculicollis*)
Distribution: Africa—all countries south of the Sahara
Conservation Status: Unprotected
2. European/Eurasian Otter (*Lutra lutra*)
Distribution: Asia, Europe, North Africa
Conservation Status: Vulnerable
3. Giant Amazonian Otter a/k/a River Wolf (*Pteronura brasiliensis*)
Distribution: Tropical rain forest of South America
Conservation Status: Endangered (Among world's rarest and most highly endangered species.)
4. Hairy-Nosed Otter a/k/a Sumatran Otter (*Lutra sumatrana*)
Distribution: Southeast Asia
Conservation Status: Insufficient Data
5. Indian Smooth-Coated Otter (*Lutra* or *Lutrogale perspicillata*)
Distribution: Southern Asia
Conservation Status: Insufficient Data
6. Large Cape Clawless Otter (*Aonyx capensis*)
Distribution: Sub-Saharan Africa
Conservation Status: Endangered
7. Large Clawless Otter a/k/a Congo Clawless Otter (*Aonyx congolae*)
Distribution: Central Equatorial Africa
Conservation Status: Unknown
8. Neotropical Otter (*Lutra longicaudis*)
Distribution: Latin America—Mexico to northern Argentina
Conservation Status: Endangered
9. North American River Otter (*Lutra* or *Lontra canadensis*)
Distribution: North America
Conservation Status: Protected in some U. S. states
10. Oriental/Asian Small-Clawed Otter (*Aonyx cinerea*)
Distribution: Asia
Conservation Status: Insufficient Data
11. Sea Cat a/k/a Marine Otter (*Lutra felina*)
Distribution: Southern Pacific coast of South America
Conservation Status: Endangered
12. Sea Otter (*Enhydra lutris*)
Distribution: Pacific coasts of Asia, North America, Russia
Conservation Status: Threatened
13. Southern River Otter (*Lutra provocax*)
Distribution: South America—coasts of western Argentina, central and southern parts of Chile
Conservation Status: Endangered

Zoo Montana

The North American river otter exhibit at Zoo Montana in Billings, Montana is a habitat of waterfalls and ponds with above and below-water viewing, surrounded by artificial rock and natural native vegetation. The water is well water and is sand-filtered and ozonated without the addition of chemicals. Our otters lead a fairly normal life. They are free to come and go from their indoor holding facilities to the outside habitat, except in the coldest winter weather when they stay inside at night. In addition to their regular prepared diet, they get live fish in the habitat every several days. We are currently displaying a pair of otters that are on loan to us. Our original inhabitants were a brother-sister pair, so the female was contracepted with a contraceptive vaccine. Her brother died recently from a congenital heart problem, so we are hoping to introduce



Otters at Zoo Montana

Photo by Liz Hooten

her to another male. We have facilities that would easily accommodate an entire family.

The otters are one of the most popular species in the zoo. They provide many people with many hours of enjoyment. At the same time, the public has demonstrated a woeful lack of knowledge about otters; we are correcting that with our

education efforts. Also, in keeping with the primary missions of Zoo Montana's environmental focus, we are putting forth an educational message that focuses on the future of otters and water quality.

— Jay F. Kirkpatrick, Ph.D.

Director of Science and
Conservation Biology

Curator of Animal Collection

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!

Please Provide Mailing Address Below:

Name _____

Address _____

City/State/Zip _____

Annual Membership Dues:

- \$15Students
- \$15Seniors
- \$25Individual
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- \$35Organization
- \$50Sustaining
- \$100Sponsoring

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

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

Int'l Otter Survival Fund

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assessing otter habitat, we will identify criteria which can be used when studying other areas in relation to otter populations. This will therefore have a wide application for the conservation of otters and their habitat worldwide.

To give just one example of our international work, IOSF and the Central Forest Biosphere Reserve in Russia are also working together in a program of joint scientific research in the preservation and study of the Eurasian Otter in the Upper Volga and West Dvina. Information on otter populations in Russia is scarce, but otters were listed as rare and declining in the 1984 Russia Red Data Book. Conservation priorities in the Tver Region (which is the size of France and Belgium combined) have to be directed towards base-line surveys and this joint scientific

program is a unique collaboration between Russian and British scientists. The program will run for three years and study populations, spatial structure, and feeding behavior. It will also run educational programs in schools and general public awareness of otters and their conservation. The end result will be the identification of conservation priorities for the Biosphere Reserve, who will then make recommendations to the Russian government in order to implement the conservation status of the Eurasian otter in the whole of the country. IOSF will be partly funding the program and supplying research students to help with the work.

There is a long way to go to ensure a safe future for our otters. However, we feel that by providing education, working with others, and by maintaining our hands-on contact with these wonderful animals in our hospital, we can at least make sure steps are being made in the right direction.

River Otter Alliance Board of Directors

Judy Berg, President

David Berg, Vice President

Tracy 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

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INSIDE:

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



