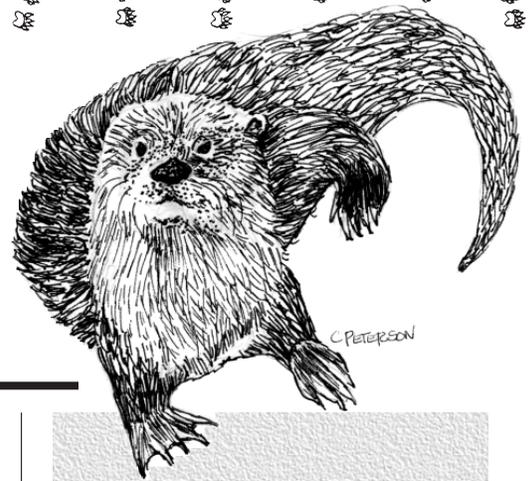


# THE RIVER OTTER JOURNAL

Volume X, Number 1, Spring 2001



## Xena, the Warrior Princess Water Otter?

By Janene Colby

*Editor's Note: Xena was acquired for the North American Mammal Show at San Diego's Wild Animal Park, but due to aggressive behavior has a permanent home with the author.*

Xena, what a funny name for an otter! My boss's daughter named her and at the time I was not happy about this strange choice in names. However, I did take the opportunity to watch her namesake on TV and realized that the name really does suit her. Sometimes I even call her "Xena, warrior princess water otter."

I had worked as an animal trainer at the Wild Animal Park in San Diego and was familiar with a variety of North American species. My favorite animal was a Grey Wolf, that is until I met Xena. I had the honor of getting to know Xena when she was only 4 weeks old and she completely 'stole my heart' from the first moment that she arrived. Since Xena was still being bottle fed around the clock, she was kept in a spare bedroom on the second floor of my house. At first she mostly slept and ate, but eventually she began to stay up longer and play. Xena loved to burrow under blankets and play in the lining of the box mattress on the bed. She would descend the flight of steps by tucking her front legs next to her sides and slither down on her belly. She loved to play in 'small' bowls of water and could conform perfectly to the shape of the bowl looking a lot like a giant donut. At about 8 weeks old, I introduced her to the bathtub. She liked this as long as her feet could touch the bottom with her head

remaining well above the water. Surprisingly, when I increased the water level she would flail about with a panicked look in her eyes. It took a few days of me holding her around the waist while she dog paddled about the tub before she was brave enough to do it on her own. It was fascinating to watch her water skills develop and improve every day.



*Xena at 4 weeks old (above) and learning to swim (below).*

*Photos by Janene Colby*



I was not her only source of fun and companionship; she also enjoyed my husband and my two dogs. She teased the dogs endlessly. She would often crawl up on the top of my sofa and lay very flat, like only an otter can do. When one of the dogs would walk past, she would surprise them by leaping onto their back. My yel-

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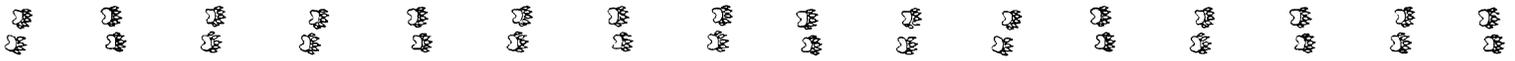
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THE RIVER OTTER JOURNAL is a semi-annual publication of the River Otter Alliance. Look for the next edition of THE RIVER OTTER JOURNAL in Autumn 2001!

## 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 parties on a national and international basis, in order to ensure the healthy future of the North American River Otter.



# President's Message

Dear Readers:

Please join me in expressing thanks to outgoing President Judy Berg and Vice President David Berg who have both worked hard on behalf of the River Otter Alliance (ROA) in their positions for the last four years. With Judy and David's recent move to Sedona, Arizona, Judy is no longer actively studying river otters and is now focusing on writing a novel (featuring none other than a river otter!). She and David will continue to be active in the group, and Judy will serve on the board as a Member at Large. (Be assured the Bergs have not lost their passion for river otters, as we spent much of my recent visit to Sedona discussing and tracking river otters in the area.) Thank you also to Carol, Jan, John and Paul, who have all contributed significantly in numerous areas to the ROA and will continue to serve on the board in various positions.

I want to welcome some new members to our board as well: Dr. Jo Thompson, field scientist for the Lukuru Wildlife Research Project in central Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire) who is active in national and international otter-related groups and once acted as foster-mother to a Congo Clawless Otter pup (see Spring 2000 issue), joins as our Membership/Public Relations Chairman; Lissa Margetts, a wildlife rehabilitator who works with North American and Asian Small Clawed Otters, joins as our Rehabilitator Liaison, and; Dr. Merav Ben-David, Assistant Professor for the University of Wyoming's Department of Zoology & Physiology who has studied river otters both in the wild and in captive situations, joins as a Scientific Advisor.

I also want to extend my thanks to Dennis Money of the New York River Otter Project, Tom Beck and other employees of the Colorado Division of Wildlife, Mark Daniel and other employees of Rocky Mountain National Park, Scott Johnson of the Indiana River Otter Reintroduction Program, and the many other people who have shared information on their otter-related reintroduction and follow-up programs. Their generosity has allowed the ROA to act as an informational liaison with other groups and entities that are contemplating reintroduction programs. This sharing of information ultimately benefits everyone—the animals in particular—when future river otter-related programs can be designed to utilize knowledge gained through others' previous experiences.

I hope you enjoy this edition of [The River Otter Journal](#). We have included some special articles on people who have given a lot to river otters, like Frank T. Webb, who has spent the last *eighty-seven years* studying river otters and is always happy to assist anyone with otter-related questions or problems. You'll read about Melanie Haire rehabilitating two orphan river otters, the loss of Good Will Ambassador Splash (a/k/a Noah) and the birth of three river otter pups at the Rocky Mountain Ark Wildlife Rehabilitation Center. We've also included articles on the New York River Otter Project, what was learned by studying the effects of oil on river otters, and the kinds of trouble river otters can cause to your home or exhibit.

As always, we appreciate your contributions of stories and photos for the newsletter, and, of course, your support through membership dues and donations.

—Tracy Johnston, President

## The Otters and the Fox

From [Fables of India](#)  
by Joseph Gaer (1955)

Two otters were fishing one day and had the good fortune to catch a huge trout, three feet long and almost as heavy as they were. The trout put up a great fight and both otters were completely exhausted by the time they landed their fish.

When the trout was safely grounded, the two friends began to quarrel about how to divide their catch. They could not agree on who should get the head and who should get the tail, and to whom belonged the greater share.

Along came a fox and stopped to listen to their dispute. The two otters turned to him.

"We caught this great trout together," they explained. "But we cannot agree on how to divide him between us. Will you help us make a fair decision?"

The fox said gravely: "I have judged many cases like this, and I am known far and wide for my skill and fairness in such matters." The fox cut the trout in three parts, and asked: "Who saw the trout first?"

"I did," said one otter. "Then to you belongs the head," said the fox, and gave him the head. He asked again: "Who helped secure the fish on the ground?"

"I did," said the second otter. "Then to you justly belongs the tail," said the fox, and gave him the fish tail.

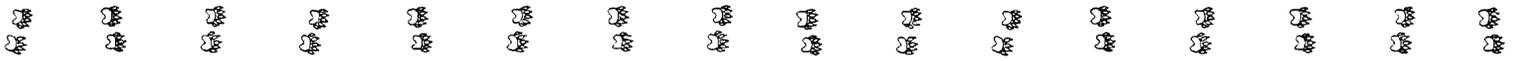
"But what of the body of the fish?" asked the otters.

"That is my share for acting as judge," said the fox as he ran off with most of the great trout in his mouth.

When the fox arrived home, his wife exclaimed admiringly: "My dear husband, how very clever you are! Tell me how did you, a land animal, catch so great a fish?"

"I caught him without having to go near the water," replied her husband. "I met two otters who knew how to catch fish together, but they did not know how to agree together when it came to dividing him. And their quarrel made me a better fisher than either of them."

— Contributed by John Mulvihill



# Xena, the Warrior Princess Water Otter?

*continued from page 1*

low lab would often watch her swim in the child's pool that we had erected for her. One day he thought it might be fun to join her in the water. Xena, on the other hand, thought it would be fun to nip at his paws. He decided to just watch after that.

Needless to say as the months wore on she became a handful. Some of you may read this and think, "how fun it must have been to raise an otter." Fun is not the word that first comes to my mind. For one thing, she could never be left unattended in the house. For otters a closed door, cabinet or shelf must be opened, climbed on and inspected. For example, there was the time she got into the fireplace and then proceeded to run joyfully through the house, with me in hot pursuit. She left a trail of black ashes all over my cream colored carpet. Another time, Xena climbed (yes, otters are good climbers) up the kitchen cabinets onto the counter spilling decorative bottles of beans and pasta everywhere before I could catch her. She thought that was particularly fun! Anything off the ground, such as a chair or sofa, is an excellent place to go to the bathroom, at least for an otter. And boy can otters go to the bathroom! I would place blankets over all the furniture for protection, but an otter would much prefer to be under the blankets than on top. She would come in and out of the house using the doggie door. One day I did not want her to go out and so I slid the cover on it. She just walked over, slid the cover up with her nose and popped out the door. There is no such thing as "otter proof."

I could go on and on with stories of how Xena redecorated my house, but instead, I will fast forward through Xena's life up to the present. Xena went to the Wild Animal Park when she was about 7 months old. She learned to wear a harness and walk on a leash. I opted for this instead of working her off a leash because I did not want to work her on a "food drive," as we so euphemistically call it.



*Xena as an adult (above and below) and friend.*

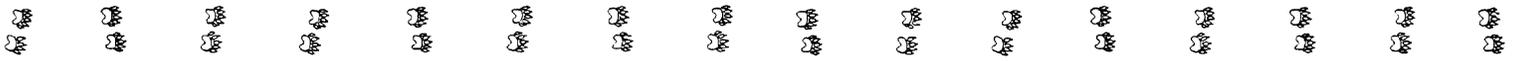
*Photos by Janene Colby*

She was smart, learned fast and could be handled by most of the other trainers. She was on the local news and even The Tonight Show with Jay Leno. After she had been at the park for a year, I left the employment of the park in order to have shoulder surgery. I visited her when I could, but that was not often since I decid-



ed to return to college and complete my course work for a biology degree. When Xena had been young, she had allowed anyone to pick her up and handle her. However, as she reached sexual maturity things changed and she became what she is—a wild animal. She bit every trainer who attempted to work with her. Her biting and other aggressive behaviors made it too big of a risk to use her as a show animal.

Xena once again lives with me, but not in my house thankfully. I decided to start my own wildlife educational program with an emphasis on river otters and the importance of preserving their habitat. Because of my experience working with wildlife, I was able to be licensed by the Department of Fish and Game and built the required enclosure and compound. Xena is very content and has everything that a wild animal could wish for, except her freedom of course. She does not know what it is like to lazily swim down a river or slide down a mud bank or catch a fish. Fortunately, she cannot miss what she does not know. It is not easy to maintain wild animals in captivity, particularly one as energetic as an otter. And for Xena it is not possible to release her back to the wild because she was never taught survival skills when she was young. My hope is that her captivity will educate people to appreciate an otter's intelligence, uniqueness, and subsequently, will motivate them to help preserve the habitat of river otters and other wildlife.



## Frank Webb, Otter Expert

By Lissa Margetts

When you think of what qualifies a person as an “expert” on the subject of otters, certain things come to mind. An expert could be someone with several letters tagged onto the front or back of their name, who could quote data verbatim from a variety of published papers. It could be a biologist who has studied otters in the field, a zoo curator who has vast experience with husbandry in captive otters. It could be a trapper who has tracked and observed otters in the wild or a private citizen who has raised and bred otters for years. There have only been a handful of people who, like Emile Leirs, truly loved otters and observed and recorded their every behavior in all venues. Emile was not a biologist, nor did he carry a Ph.D., but he truly “knew” otters. He was a wealth of information when there was little that was known about otters. He was the one who questioned the length of a river otters’ gestation period and broached the possibility of delayed implantation. There is another diamond out there too; he is a veritable treasure by the name of Frank T. Webb.

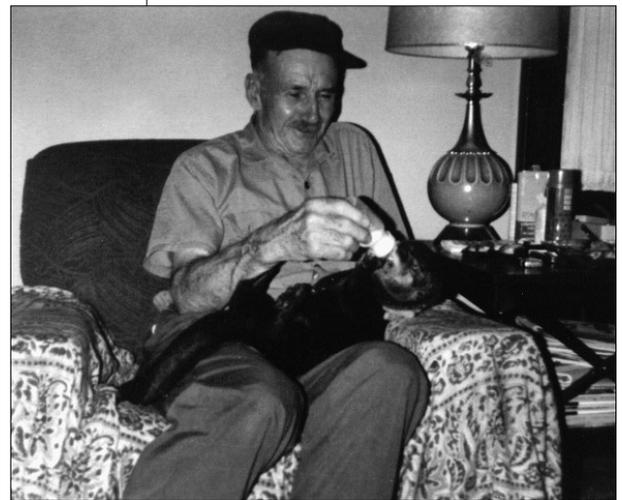


Left: Frank with otter pups. — Above: Sleeping pups. — Below: Feeding Time.  
Photos courtesy of Frank Webb

Frank is a quiet man who has lived in the town of New York Mills, New York, for all but one of his 97 years. Frank was born on May 3, 1904, and like Emil, is one of the few people who you can truly call an “expert” on otters. He started out fur trapping when he was only 10 years old. The river otter was the one animal that always captivated him with their intelligence and playful mannerisms. He would track them and observe their behavior, note their slides and pullouts, scat and denning areas. Back then there were no soft catch traps with rubber jaws. Frank used a 15 X Victor foothold trap with a wider jaw that distributed the pressure more evenly across the foot to catch and bring home his first live otter. That was back in 1954. He has kept over 100 otters since then.

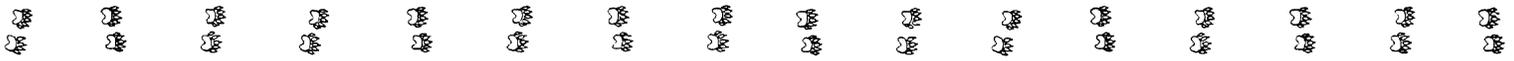
Frank was the caretaker for a huge privately owned property belonging to the Adirondack League Club. He would patrol the boundaries and trap and relocate nuisance animals. Frank and his wife of 65 years, Mary (who passed away five years ago at 85 years-young) raised two daughters and a son together. They also helped raise 15 litters of otter pups over the years. Though Mary shared

Frank’s love for one particular favorite otter named Keeko, it was Frank who had the deepest passion for the otters, keeping diligent records, documenting breeding cycles, births, deaths, dietary needs,



vitamin and mineral deficiencies and was one of the first to note the need for adding Thiamin to an otter’s diet. He noted the “good fish” and the “bad fish” used for food and how it would affect an otter’s health. Frank learned to modify traps, and helped develop and teach safe trapping techniques for both the Pennsylvania and New York river otter reintroduction programs.

Angie Berchielli is one of the few female trappers around and has been lucky enough to have been one of Frank Webb’s protégés, and works to provide



otters for reintroduction programs herself. She has known Frank for 15 years now and says, "Frank is an institution and my mentor. I had heard about him long before meeting him. He has taught me everything from good trapping techniques to how to build and maintain a good holding facility, proper diet and safe handling of otters." Angie also notes "In all the years that Frank has handled otters, he has never once been bitten! Quite an accomplishment for someone, if you know how these critters can turn inside-out in their skin and have jaws that can take your finger off." She also says what an honor it has been to work with Frank and one of the greatest lessons she has learned is to be both gentle and patient when working with otters.

Frank obtained much of his "know-how" from using basic common sense, observation, trial and error, and scouring material about the much studied otter cousin, the mink. He also recorded everything. He feels confident that the best time to breed an otter is at 40 days postpartum and every three days thereafter, to a dominant breeder male. He has had much success with this and one of his males was a "stud-muffin" for six different females who each had litters the following year. This particular male was sent to Flint, Michigan, and became one of Frank's saddest memories: This otter and three others were sent with a transport service that detoured to Washington, D.C., before going on to Michigan. The delay caused the death of three of those otters, including his precious breeder male. You can still hear the sadness in his voice as he relates the story. He then changes the subject, and with a twinkle in his eye that I could feel right through the phone line 2,000 miles away, he recalls the joy of bottle feeding otter pups whose eyes were barely open and watching them grow up to do back flips into their ponds. I can sense the smile on his face as he shares the fond memories of Keeko climbing in and out of the clothes hamper and playing with his dog.

Frank is a little slower getting around these days and goes to bed a little earlier. "I don't walk so good anymore," he

says in his soft voice. But his mind is as sharp as a tack. Reality is, Frank is 97 years old and will one day no longer be around to share with us all the untroved treasure of his 87 years of otter experience. What will become of his records?...Who will pass on his knowledge?...Frank is a precious jewel and a

man who is still enchanted by these aquatic clowns. Though his pens are currently empty, Frank is not over his love of this endearing creature. He is anxiously awaiting the inevitable arrival of this year's sick or injured otters to care for. He can't wait. He is a man who truly loves otters.

## Rio Grande Otter Meeting in Taos, New Mexico

By Paul J. Polechla, Jr., Ph.D.

On 27 February 2001, I organized a meeting on the Southwestern River Otter (*Lontra canadensis sonora*) on the upper Rio Grande and environs. The Bureau of Land Management hosted the meeting at Taos, New Mexico. The purpose of the meeting was to present findings from my B.L.M. funded study on the same subject. A variety of governmental and other interested agencies attended.

Interspersed through the presentation and at the end there was a question-answer session and a discussion. All people and agencies expressed an interest in river otters of the region. The southwestern river otter is a subspecies that is imperiled in the riparian zone of the arid lands. In short, it is the most endangered mammal in the most endangered habitat in all of North America. No extant wild nor captive populations have been identified. People traveling along the river still report seeing them. The species saw a decline in the late 1890's to early 1900's due to the increase in human population and our activities: unregulated over trapping, over grazing, intensive irrigation, mining without reclamation, over logging, and organic pollu-

tion. The middle and late 1900's saw an improvement in water quality and increased conservation efforts: founding of the first water gauging station in the nation, rehabilitation of the beaver population, founding of the Wild and Scenic River to protect the upper Rio Grande, protection of the riparian zone from grazing, and increasing citizen awareness and involvement. Recent reintroduction and/or stocking efforts in neighboring states may further imperil this unique river otter that is large size, light coat, and with a unique head shape.

Although the river shows signs of recovery from the all out exploitation days, it still needs improvement. Ways to enhance the riparian were outlined. The need for habitat remediation was discussed. Some recent reports claim improving water quality in the Red River, a Rio Grande tributary. The problem of dewaterization of the Rio Costilla was posed. Tributaries that have not been surveyed were enumerated. The roles of the Local, State, Federal, Native American, and non-governmental agencies were talked about. We also discussed options on grant proposals.

The general consensus among attendees was that any existing populations should be fostered or that the feasibility of reintroduction should be explored. We decided to call our committee of professional people the "Otter Working Group." We vowed to meet in early April 2001 at Pilar, New Mexico, at the B.L.M. field office on the banks of the Rio Grande.

Visit the River Otter Alliance Web Page at [www.otternet.com/ROA](http://www.otternet.com/ROA)

# Otter Updates

By Tracy Johnston

- The International Otter Survival Fund (IOSF) reported in their Spring 2001 newsletter that wildlife-warning road reflectors on Scotland's Isle of Skye have decreased river otter road mortalities by 75% in test areas over a two-year period. Unnoticeable to drivers, reflectors placed on both sides of a road work by deflecting a portion of headlight beams out into adjoining terrain to produce an "optical warning fence" to alert wildlife to the danger of on-coming traffic.

- The Spring 2000 river otter population census in Colorado's Rocky Mountain National Park showed an estimated twenty-two river otters using the park, according to a January 25, 2001 report recently released by the park. This is an increase from the 1998 census, which showed an estimated sixteen otters using the park. Prior to this, census totals have ranged from a low of thirteen to a former high of seventeen since the surveys began in 1989. Indigenous to the area, forty-one river otters were reintroduced to the Kawuneeche Valley located within the park between 1978 and 1983 as part of Colorado's river otter reintroduction program.

- The first southern sea otter pup to be conceived, born and survive in captivity is being raised by his mother at his Oregon Zoo home. The pup was a surprise to keepers when he was born on January 3, 2001, because both his mother (Thelma) and father (Eddie) were considered too young to have offspring. The sea otter pup made his public debut on March 9, 2001, but not without controversy: a discrepancy in the voting contest to select his name arose when zoo officials discovered "a few overly enthusiastic" online participants voted between two and thirty times for the same name. The votes were retabulated and multiple votes from the same sources were eliminated. Then on March 13, 2001, Oregon Secretary of State Bill Bradbury certified the vote and zoo Director Tony Vecchio made the official announcement the pup's name will be "Oz," (initials represent "Oregon Zoo," the place of his birth).

- Sexie Sadie, a permanent resident at the Rocky Mountain Ark Wildlife Rehabilitation Center in Telluride, Colorado, gave birth to three river otter pups on March 7, 2001. The pups, two males and a female, are doing well and have already more than doubled in size. The birth of the pups was recorded on video by infrared cameras located inside the nesting box. Center Director Lissa Margetts hopes one of the pups will be trainable to participate in educational programs, taking the place of River Otter Goodwill Ambassador Splash (a/k/a Noah) who died suddenly of apparent heart failure at the Center on December 13, 2000. (See articles in Autumn 2000 edition.)

- Melanie Haire successfully rehabilitated and released two more orphaned river otters last August near her home in Conyers, Georgia. All appeared well until January 5, 2001, when the female appeared at the feeding station with a severe facial injury. Melanie administered antibiotics to her for two weeks by hiding it in fish and the wound now appears to be healing well. She plans to gradually wean the otters off the



Got milk?

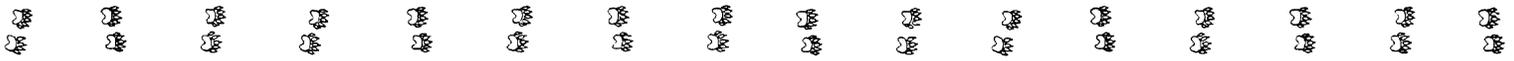
Photo by Melanie Haire

feeding station by April 1, 2001, in preparation for this year's orphans. The two males she rehabilitated and released on the Yellow River in 1999 (see "Otter Updates" in Spring 2000 edition) were last seen March 15, 2000, when they also appeared to be doing well. It is assumed both these otters have now moved on to establish their own territories.

- A river otter-themed children's "edutainment center" named *Totter Otterville* is scheduled to open in August 2001 inside Johnny's Toys, a 45,000 square foot retail toy store located in Covington, Kentucky. Complete with the *Otterly Delicious Café*, *Totter Otterville* will combine entertainment and education play events for children up to age eight in a 9,000 square foot center. The River Otter Alliance provided assistance to center designer, CEO Randy White of White Hutchinson Leisure & Learning Group, in the form of river otter photographs and other resources for development of theme related materials.



Totter the Otter



# Letter to the Editor

*Editor's Note: The following letter is a follow up to readers' questions on Dr. Ben-David's "Responses of River Otters to Oil Contamination: A Captive Study" article published in the Autumn 2000 River Otter Journal.*

Dear Editor:

It was brought to my attention that several of your readers were upset to read my article "Responses of river otters to oil contamination: a captive study" in the previous issue of the Newsletter. Concerns mainly focused on the feeding of oil to river otters and the demise of the captive animals after release. I would like to take the opportunity to provide additional information, which I hope will alleviate some of these concerns.

Unfortunately, oil spills occur worldwide on a daily basis. Some receive media coverage, such as the recent spill in the Galapagos Islands, but most go unannounced. Daily, numerous marine, aquatic, and terrestrial animals are exposed to lethal or sublethal levels of hydrocarbons. Our only means to bring to the attention of the responsible parties that these spills are hazardous to living organisms even in small quantities and to press on them the need for safer transport practices, is to provide them with unequivocal data, that was collected with careful scientific methods.

We determined to conduct our captive/controlled studies on river otters because coastal river otters are the only diving mammals that inhabit marine environments but are not protected under the Marine Mammal Act. As efficient divers, river otters were the only species on which we could study the effects of oiling on diving physiology, data that can be used as baseline for other marine mammals. In addition, river otters were one of few species for which data on physiological, behavioral and ecological responses to hydrocarbon exposure were available following the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill. Interpretations of that data were challenged because the direct relation between oiling and those responses could not be unequivocally determined in the field studies.

Let me emphasize again, the quantities of oil we fed to the otters were minute and externally no signs of illness or discomfort were obvious. Such amounts of oil are probably ingested by wildlife around our globe following any of these oil spills, long after the television crews have packed up and left and we the public are back to our regular daily lives. All our handlings, procedures, and experiments were open to public scrutiny and observation. We conducted all our experiments at the Alaska Sealife Center in front of thousands of visitors from the general public, school groups, and the media. We had interpreters available to explain the reasons for conducting the research and the details of the procedures. These interpreters also answered questions from the visitors. My technicians, students, and I gave lectures and tours to visiting groups to explain the project. The only negative response we ever received was on how terrible the otters

were for eating the fishes they captured while they were still alive.

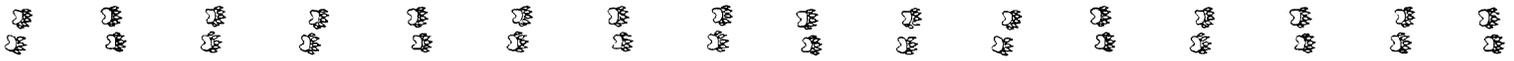
As I mentioned in the article, exposing these river otters to petroleum hydrocarbons was an emotionally difficult task, despite our knowledge that the quantities were minute. It would have been a difficult task with any study animal, but for me who spent years studying wild otters it was especially acute. This is why I can relate to the readers, the otter lovers, who felt so strongly while reading my article. Nonetheless, I would like these readers to consider that although we exposed the animals to hydrocarbons, we ensured that they were fully recovered from the treatment before they were released back in the wild.

The information we were able to obtain from this experiment can and hopefully will assist managers and lawmakers in their efforts to reduce the occurrence of oil spills. We observed that small quantities of oil, such that can be found in contaminated sites years after a spill occurred, impair diving and reduce the ability of animals to fully assimilate their food. These indicate that oil spills likely will have lingering effects and may affect populations of marine animals years following a spill. In addition, the auxiliary data we obtained on natural history, behavior, physiology, genetics, and veterinary medicine add considerably to our understanding of otters and hopefully will contribute to conservation of otters worldwide.

I believe that the readers would have been less concerned about the study if the released animals experienced better survivorship. The low survivorship was a grim surprise to us all. In view of the success of numerous reintroduction projects in North America and Europe, where animals were removed from their home-range, handled by humans (sometimes held in captivity for months before release), and transported to foreign landscapes (sometime to areas with completely different environmental conditions) we did not expect such high mortality in our animals. We planned the release with the following in mind: 1.) Animals were returned to their original area so they would not have to acclimate to a new environment; 2.) The release was timed to a period when male otters conduct large breeding migrations so the appearance of new males is common; 3.) Animals were released in groups to facilitate cooperative foraging; and 4.) Younger animals were released with older more experienced animals to ensure that they would be able to obtain food through their association with the older individuals. To our surprise the released otters did not remain together. Within a few days they dispersed and several left the area of release traveling long distances. Whether the breakdown of groups facilitated the demise of individuals is unclear but our data provides wildlife rehabilitators some hard learned lessons regarding the feasibility of rehabilitation and the effects of captivity on post-release survival.

Let me close by advocating again the need for our oil-consuming society to increase the efforts for prevention of oil spills. Let's not ignore the lessons we learned from this captive study.

*Many thanks,  
Merav Ben-David*



# Home At Last!

By Dennis Money

On this day, this historic day, people of all interests came to Honeoye Lake, one of the smaller Western Finger Lakes. Seasoned sportsmen, women dressed in their finest outdoor wear, excited children impatiently dragging their parents. A diverse group, but all sharing one common desire—to see the dynamic and energetic river otter return to its former home at Honeoye Lake after an absence of over 100 years. Today was the day for which so many people had been waiting. The enthusiasm was infectious as more and more people streamed onto the property formerly owned by Emil Muller but now owned by Finger Lakes Community College (FLCC) and operated as their newest biological station.

The more than four hundred people who came to the release that day were not to be disappointed. A little after 10 a.m., three New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) trucks arrived with the guests, seven river otters. Four of the otters being released that day were being sponsored by FLCC. Those four animals also carried transmitters that had been surgically implanted by the veterinary staff of Rochester's Seneca Zoo. Once these four otters were released, they would be monitored by FLCC conservation students, to learn more about the otter's lifestyle.

One by one the boxes containing the otters were placed on the ground to the delight of all the people pressing on the barrier rope. Shutterbugs and video cameras were evident everywhere. It was truly a Kodak moment! Media from several newspapers and television stations were doing their thing prior to the release either dashing from otter to otter snapping photos or interviewing the crowd that had gathered. Finally, the moment came. It was time to return these river otters back home to Honeoye Lake.

As the doors to the cages were opened, the "brown torpedoes" raced across the



Photo courtesy of Dennis Money

grass and dove into the water, never even stopping to say "thanks" to the team that had brought them to their new home. Most of the otters surfaced on the water for just a few seconds and then dove. A trail of air bubbles signaled where the otter was heading and people followed those bubbles hoping they would surface again to provide another photo op. As the last otter dashed into the water, all of the volunteers and DEC personnel who had worked so diligently for six years, felt both excitement as well as an emptiness—six years of inviting the public to view otters being released had just ended. In the next two weeks, the remaining otters would be released without fanfare at the south ends of two other Finger Lakes—Canandaigua and Hemlock. After six long years, the partnership had succeeded in meeting the objective of releasing at least 270 river otters in nine locations in Central and Western New York State. The final count was actually 279 otters! The acquisition stage of the Project was over. The next stage will be monitoring the otters for three years. The monitoring phase would be conducted by the DEC Bureau of Wildlife staff, various colleges, and interested volunteers to determine if otter populations were expanding in both the release and surrounding areas.

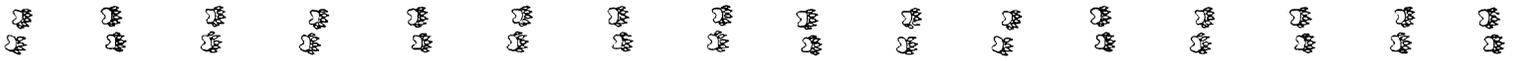
The partnership of the New York River Otter Project was unique for a wildlife project in New York State. For the first time, the private sector played a significant role with the DEC in a wildlife restoration project. Rochester Gas and Electric Corp.

(RG&E) and the law firm of Nixon Peabody, LLP were important initial sponsors, carrying on from their success with introducing peregrine falcons to Rochester. This was to become a breakthrough partnership. The Rochester Democrat and Chronicle wrote in an article on the otter project, "this is the model program for environmentalism in the new millennium." In the words of a Bob Dylan song, "The times, they are a changing."

The idea for the otter restoration project had started in the 1980's but it wasn't until public meetings were held in 1994 that the project started to gain momentum. The meetings were held to gather input about restoring the river otter back to these parts of the state. It was clear the public wanted the otters returned but without any significant detriment to existing conservation programs. Knowing the limitations of both DEC Bureau of Wildlife staff and available money, meetings were held in the fall of 1994 at the Seneca Zoo in Rochester between the DEC, trappers and the private sector. The result was the formation of the New York River Otter Project, Inc. (ROP). ROP was charged with raising the more than \$300,000 needed for the acquisition stage, conducting public relations and establishing education programs for the project. It was a daunting task, but one in which all members felt a passion to succeed.

Since that first year, thousands of hours of effort have been expended to make the Project successful. Dozens of people, both volunteers and DEC staff, gave up their nights to give presentations and their weekends to sell merchandise at various events to support the project. These people are indicative of the quality and desire of those individuals who believed or made this project succeed. The media was soon tuned into the Project due to their activities. An impressive list of newspapers and magazines covered the story, as well as national television and radio stations, which carried the story of the New York otter project far beyond state boundaries. The Provinces of Ontario





and Quebec, as well as the European countries of Holland and Spain, asked for advice on how to make their otter restoration programs successful. Truly, the Project was making impacts around the civilized world.

In addition, ROP was both traditional and innovative in their marketing approach for fund raising. Besides selling excellent quality merchandise in a variety of forms such as “Tees”, sweatshirts, hats and tote bags, ROP showcased a couple of unique fundraising ideas. First was an ice cream. Produced by Perry’s Ice Cream of Akron, New York, “Welcome Back Otter” ice cream sold all 35,000 half gallons in just seven weeks! The second hit was the return of the Otter Spring wine to the Heron Hill Winery list of its fine wines. Equally as impressive as the ice cream, both the Chardonnay and Baco Noir wines bottled for the Project quickly sold out. In both situations, Perry’s Ice Cream and Heron Hill Winery donated part of the proceeds of each sale to the Project. Brian Buckley, a noted wildlife painter, also crafted a fine otter print entitled “The Mudslidders” and he also donated part of the sale of each print to the Project. Companies such as RG&E and Nixon Peabody LLP, were significant business sponsors, both financially and by allowing some of their employees to participate in key roles in the Project. The Seneca Zoo Society, Hawk Creek Wildlife Rehabilitation Center, Genesee Valley Trappers, Genesee Valley Audubon Society and the New York State Trappers rounded out this unusual marriage of organizations by contributing both money and volunteers. A website was developed ([www.nyotter.org](http://www.nyotter.org)) to provide highlights of the project for the world to enjoy. The site profiled both otter and human-interest stories, the biology of the river otter and what to do if you sighted an otter. The website will continue to operate during the monitoring stage of the Project.

All the money in the world, however, doesn’t get Mr. or Ms. Otter from the Adirondack or Catskill Mountains to Central and Western New York State. It takes trappers. Trappers committed to following the written trapping protocols for the project that had been developed by the DEC, seasoned otter trappers, Cornell

University College of Veterinary Medicine, and ROP. After all, if New York State was to have the *best* river otter restoration project in North America, it had to have the input of those most intimately involved. To the best of our knowledge, no other river otter project had this level of care and commitment. No other river otter project had both written trapping and transportation protocols. Being second was not acceptable—our Project had to be first, the best!

Otters are relatively uncommon even in the best habitat and therefore they take a great deal of time to trap. To insure quality, any trapper wanting to participate in the Project had to attend training sessions conducted by both the DEC and other trappers. At these sessions, seasoned otter trappers would explain how to live trap otters. The trapping protocol allowed for the use of several kinds of foothold traps or box traps. If foothold traps were chosen, they had to have offset jaws, a shock absorber and at least seven swivel points. Over 98% of the otters trapped for the Project were trapped using foothold traps. Clearly, foothold traps are a viable tool for wildlife management or restoration in New York and other states and provinces. In addition to its technical expertise, the New York State Trappers Association also lobbied for, and received, a \$40,000 member item from the New York State legislature to help fund the Project.

DEC Bureau of Wildlife staff from Regions 7, 8 and 9 coordinated with the Project trappers to insure that all trapping participants were properly trained and that they had the correct equipment and transport cages for the trapped otters. DEC staff also coordinated trapping research on otter avoidance techniques for areas where the otters had been released and that were not open for otter trapping. This consisted of using live otters on loan from the Seneca Zoo and having those otters run the gauntlet of a variety of fixed trigger configurations of #330 Conibear traps. These activities were videotaped and will form the basis of best management practices for otters in New York. This research developed over the course of the Project and shows the breath of effort by all parties to glean as much information as possible for improving wildlife manage-

ment. In addition, several retired DEC employees became employed as the transporters of the otters to Cornell University or the Seneca Zoo. These transporters recorded valuable data from the trappers, which was reviewed and documented by both the DEC, and Cornell University. We wanted to capture as much information as possible that at some point could be utilized by other states or countries seeking to know more about otter biology, management and restoration.

Shortly after an otter had been trapped, trained transporters were called by the trapper to pick up the animal. Usually the otters were driven to Cornell University’s College of Veterinary Medicine. Cornell University had been involved from the very first year of the Project. Its diagnosis of health conditions of the otters will add significant information to the medical community for this animal. Also participating in housing the river otters during the course of the Project were the Seneca Zoo in Rochester and the Thompson Zoo in Watertown. Both facilities handled the “overflow” of otters when Cornell’s “otter hotel” was filled. The basis for sending the otters to these facilities was to insure, prior to release, that the otters were in their best physical shape. By the time the otters were ready for release, they all looked like little “Arnold’s.” Otters gained, on average, at least 15% in body weight during the short time they were housed at these various locations. Living in the wilder areas of the New York State is no cup of tea for otters and the veterinarians for the project noticed mineral and vitamin deficiencies in the wild animals. To improve their quality of life, the otters were administered vitamins, minerals and antibiotics along with a diet rich in salmon and lake trout. Once again, quality was stressed during the captive management stage of the Project.

The original objective of the Project had been to restore a viable population of river otters to Central and Western New York. It quickly became apparent, however, that educating the public, especially the school children about this endeavor, was also of significant importance. Eventually, ROP notified over 800 schools in the Project area which resulted in thou-

*continued on page 12*

# Otters in the Office?

By Nancy Mitchell

*Editor's Note: River otters Andy and Oscar live on display at Union Federal Savings & Loan in Kewanee, Illinois under the care of article author, Nancy Mitchell. (See related article in Spring 2000 edition, written by veterinarian, Dr. Dave Modder.)*

Imagine one day you are talking to the President of the Association where you work and he is telling you about the plans for the new addition that they are in the process of building. Then he says, "What do you think about building an atrium and having live river otters living in the office?" Of course I am completely surprised by the idea and then when asked if I would be interested in taking care of the otters, I am speechless. I was familiar with otters from nature programs on TV and seeing them at the Shed Aquarium in Chicago, but I had no experience dealing with wild animals. Keep in mind I work at a Savings & Loan and my work experience has been working behind a desk. My animal experience has been only with the family dogs, fish and parakeets. We continued to talk and he further explains his plans and that I would be given information needed to learn about otters. I reluctantly agreed and left the meeting with my head spinning and wondering what I have gotten myself into.

Months went by and we were ready to move into the building. Mr. Hansen, our President, called me into his office and told me that the otters would fly from the otter farm in Louisiana, where they had been purchased, and would arrive at the Moline, Illinois, airport, an hour away from Kewanee. Mr. Hansen and Mr. Donovan, our current President, drove to the airport that night to pick them up and bring them to their new home. The next day when I arrived at work I was very nervous and unsure of what was going to happen. The maintenance man greeted me and told me that Mr. Donovan had been bitten while transferring the animals into their new cages, and had to go to the emergency room for treatment. What a great start.

As I begin my first day as an otter caretaker, the otters are nervous and vocal whenever someone comes into their room. Our vet soon arrives and a hands-on exam-



*The view of Andy and Oscar from the offices at Union Federal Savings & Loan.*

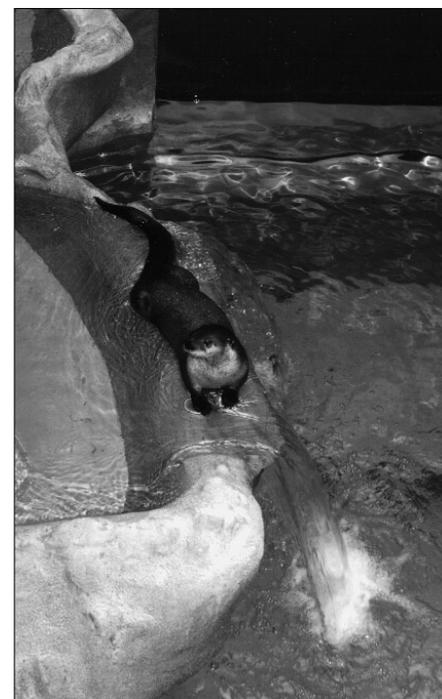
*Photo by Dianne L. Beetler, courtesy of Union Federal*

ination was out of the question, so we allow the otters out to their water area and begin to observe their behavior. This begins a very interesting time in our lives. After about a month, we settled into our routines and my day begins with cleaning their cages, getting the first feeding going and talking to each of them. I soon begin to realize they respond to certain words and become familiar with the daily routines. During this time the otters were observing us also. The otters had their ways of communicating with me, I soon learned when I would walk by the observation windows, they would think it was time for feeding and were disappointed when I would not let them into their cages. They also have their way of telling me when it is time to eat.

We became more comfortable with each other, after a time whenever we would clean their water area, they began to approach us and we would offer a treat to them, so they would become more at ease with us in their environment. The months of watching paid off with understanding of each of the otter's different personalities and behavior. Oscar is more aggressive; he loves smelt and will do just about anything to get as much as he can. One day while they were in their cages eating, Oscar finished his smelt first and immediately ran over to Andy's side of the cage. Andy was still eating his smelt; Oscar took the end of the smelt out of Andy's mouth while he was still eating. Poor Andy just sat there dazed at what had just happened.

Different times I would be watching the otters play and customers would approach and comment, "It must be nice to just stand around and watch Oscar and Andy play," and I would say "Yes, it is," because I need to know them, so when something is not

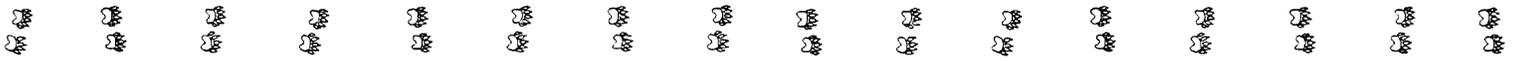
right I will know it immediately. Fortunately, our otters have enjoyed good health, but there have been a couple of occasions when something was not right and treatment was needed. One example was when Oscar's behavior was off. He was not interested in eating. He was pawing at his mouth, which was not his normal behavior, so I called Dr. Modder and we were able to isolate him in his cage. We tranquilized him and found he had an infected tooth. The tooth was pulled, antibiotics were prescribed and Oscar was soon back to his normal self.



*Andy and Oscar's 4,000 gallon swimming area.*

*Photo courtesy of Union Federal Savings & Loan*

The first year was at times frustrating. The otters would not allow any handling, which made it difficult when it came to giving them their vaccinations. They tore up the outdoor carpeting we had for them to dry off on. They brought their bedding towels from their cage, and the towels became stuck in the drain. This meant that we would have to drain the swimming area (which is approximately 4,000 gallons of water), pull the towels out, and refill the atrium. They dug up the plant that was put in their drying area and they enjoyed pulling off the caulk that was around the viewing windows. We had a couple of escapes from the cages and a very difficult



time capturing them, and I have had my share of bites. Each incident was a challenge to come up with solutions. Each problem was met with a lot of thought with the staff, and solutions were eventually found. There were times when I was about ready to throw in the towel and give up. It isn't fun being outsmarted by two otters. Who is in charge here anyway?

Nevertheless, as we overcame the problems, life became much easier. We have settled into our routines. Oscar and Andy have allowed me to become closer to them. I cannot pick them up or hold them, but they do allow me to pet them and we have established a trust in each other to a degree. We have all come a long way since our first day together.

We have also had good advice from many people, Doctors Verna Waidmann, Tony Kuenstler and Dave Modder, our veterinary support, Doug Holmes at Glenn Oak Zoo, Peoria, Illinois and our otter expert, Rich Freitag at Central Nebraska Packing. A special thank you to each of them for their invaluable support and advice.

After nine years of caring for Oscar and Andy, I can't imagine not having them in my life. I am privileged to care for these two otters; I never tire of watching them play. In February 2001, Oscar and Andy were eleven years old, and in August 2001, they will celebrate their tenth year at Union Federal.

I enjoy sharing what I know about otters with the different school groups and people who come in to visit with Oscar and Andy. The community has been supportive of our exhibit; it is the first place families bring their visitors.

Otters are endangered in Illinois and it is our mission to help visitors understand that how we treat our environment has an influence on all of us. It is our hope that each time someone visits this exhibit and sees first hand how wonderful these animals are and how much enjoyment they give, that they will become more committed to keeping our environment clean and safe for all who live on this earth.

As the poet W.H. Davis put it, "What is life if full of care, we have not time to stop



**Andy and Oscar**  
Photo courtesy of Union Federal Savings & Loan

and stare?" Those who visit and work in this office, who often stop and stare, are amused at the antics of Oscar and Andy, and appreciate the wonder of the otter.

Union Federal is licensed as an exhibitor by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Illinois Department of Natural Resources and is subject to the laws governing endangered species.

If you are ever in the Kewanee area, please stop by and visit with Oscar and Andy.

# The River Otter Alliance

**ENROLL NOW FOR 2001!**

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:**

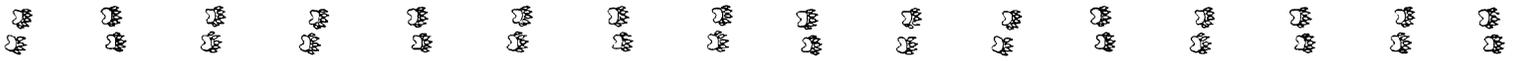
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**Annual Membership Dues:**

- \$15 ..... Student
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Complete and return this form with your 2001 membership check to:

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



# Home At Last !

*continued from page 9*

sands of school children becoming involved in both fund raising and learning more about both this dynamic mammal as well as the value of habitat. Teachers developed special curriculums that were taught for several weeks at a time that dealt with these topics for the educational components. For fundraising, schools went the full spectrum—some had pizza parties, others made and sold their own otter shirts, while others had read-a-thons. One school even made up their own song about otters. When an otter release was near one of the schools, the children and their teachers were invited to both attend and release the otters. For many children, this was the first time they had ever seen a wild otter, and the excitement on their faces and in their voices made for an excellent compliment to the otters being released.

Six years have gone quickly and for those of us that have been so heavily associated with the Project, there is an emptiness now that the last river otter has been released. There is a great amount of pride, however, for being able to participate in such a noble project and seeing it to completion. Very few people have ever had the opportunity to work with such a wonderful animal such as the river otter. We were indeed, a fortunate group. Many times the media would ask one of us, "Of what value is the river otter?" or "Why are you doing this?" The answer was simple. We indicated that the river otter was a symbol, a symbol that people wanted to be good environmental stewards, to do something positive. The restoration of the river otter to Central and Western New York State is an excellent example of many people, of diverse backgrounds, being proactive for conservation and the environment. Welcome home river otter. You have been missed. Home at last!

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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 2001 update on  
the New York River Otter Project,  
research news, and interesting stories!*