

# River Otters In Florida

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The **River Otter** (*Lutra canadensis*) is the largest member of the weasel family in Florida. River otters are common in the Southeast States from Texas to Maryland, and in New England, the Great Lakes States, all of subarctic Canada and Alaska, and the Northwestern United States. The river otter occurs throughout Florida along rivers, streams, canals, lakes, ponds, salt and freshwater marshes, swamps, bays, estuaries, and mangroves. People are often surprised to see river otters in highly urbanized counties like Pinellas. Otters will travel along canals and storm drains to go from one pond to the next and they will travel overland for miles to reach isolated ponds. Otters travel a great deal in the search for food. An otter may have a home range as large as 50 to 60 square miles and a male otter may travel up to 10 miles a night. Of course, a female leading her kits usually covers much less ground.

Adult otters reach four feet in length and about 25 pounds. Females are somewhat smaller averaging about 44 inches and 19 pounds. It takes two years for female otters to reach sexual maturity and longer for males. In the Southeast, mating takes place in the Spring, but because of delayed implantation the early-stage embryos do not attach to the wall of the uterus or develop until November or December. The embryos take 60 - 65 days to develop after implantation and 1 - 4 kits (average litter size 2.6) are born in January or February. The female alone cares for her youngsters. She has 4 nipples located on her upper chest to nurse them. Otters den in hollow trees, log jams, the abandoned dens or lodges of beaver or nutria, in old duck blinds, in sand boats, under buildings and among the exposed roots of trees along streams. The female will move her young if she senses danger. The young will travel with their mother until the following

winter, just before she gives birth to her next litter. When you see a group of otters, it is usually a female and her kits.

Otters are primarily nocturnal, but can be seen anytime of the day. They are famous for their playful behavior. Otters can be quite vocal, making chirps, grunts and loud piercing screams. Fish makes up the majority of the diet of otters. They also consume crayfish, saltwater crabs, frogs, tadpoles, salamanders, freshwater shrimp, insects, snakes and turtles. They prefer the slower rough fish like talapia, goldfish, carp, catfish, and carsuckers over bass, black crappie, and other sunfish so they rarely compete with human fishermen. Their feeding

behavior can cause problems in koi ponds, in ponds stocked with expensive triploid grass carp for aquatic plant control, and in catfish and tropical aquaculture ponds. Fencing can be an effective deterrent to otter predation in ponds. Use fencing that has no larger than 3 x 3 inch openings. Electric fences have been tried, but they are most effective when used with perimeter fences described above. River otters are listed in Appendix II of the Convention on International

Trade in Endangered Species of Flora and Fauna (CITES) because of their resemblance to the endangered European Otter. In Florida, the otter is classified as a furbearer and may be hunted or trapped from December 1 through March 1. Live

traps and snares are the only traps that can be used in

Florida. Snares are ineffective on

otters, so nuisance beaver trappers prefer to use snares to reduce accidental killing of otters. The best way to see otters is to canoe quietly down rivers, streams, or along the edges of lakes in the early morning or late afternoon.

