

# BOGDIVERSITY THURSDAY



—*from Head Naturalist Clinton*

## North American River Otter

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Our list of mammals that call the Sax-Zim Bog home to profile during Bogdiveristy Thursday posts is getting shorter and shorter. Mammals are a charismatic group, so it is hard to not share about the amazing mammal diversity in our region during our posts! There is one fairly large, but often difficult to see, mammal that has not been considered in our posts thus far: North American River Otter!

Otters are charismatic, social, large, and tied to aquatic ecosystems. In general, otters have the classic long tube shape of all weasels, with two-toned (brown and whiteish) coats. They have broad heads, with powerful jaws and thick tails. Due to their aquatic nature, otter toes are strongly webbed. Otters are found in most aquatic systems around the world, including salt water ecosystems. Some otters are quite rare and in need of conservation, while others are quite common and adaptable to many different ecosystem types. There are a total of 13 species of otter worldwide, with only 2 species (Sea Otter and Marine Otter) being found in saltwater environments exclusively. Otters are

collectively the largest weasels. North American River Otter is the largest weasel in Minnesota, with males reaching up to 30 pounds and stretching to a total length of 5 and a half feet!

As noted above, otters are weasels, but very different from the typical weasel you might consider. First, they are nearly entirely aquatic. Of Minnesota's weasels, the only other species found near water with any frequency is the American Mink. Otters spend most of their time in or near water. However, this doesn't mean if an otter is away from water, it is at risk. Very capable on land, otters frequently make over-land movements in search of new territories and feeding areas during winter and non-winter months.

The next big difference between otters and their other weasel cousins is that they are incredibly social animals. Most weasels are solitary, tolerating other weasels only during the mating season. North American River Otters, and most other otter species, have strong familial ties and intricate social structures. Often, these family groups will spend their time together at den sites and especially while foraging. Play helps facilitate these social relationships, which is perhaps a trademark behavior of otters!

Finally, like all other weasels, otters are excellent predators. North American River Otters eat a wide range of food items, from fish to frogs to turtles to crayfish. They can be significant local predators on turtles, especially during the winter months. Otters are one of the few mammalian predators that have strong enough jaws to predate turtles effectively. If you ever have a chance to see an

otter skull, check out their teeth! Their molars have strong cutting edges, and interlock, making them incredible slicing and crushing teeth. Consequently, if you ever find otter scat, it is almost always very oily and filled with fish scales and bones!

Weasels are an amazing group of mammals, with otters being incredibly unique members of this diverse family.

More information about otters can be found in the photos below!

(Photos by Sparky Stensaas; Skull photos by Kelly Rundell)



Play, sleep, hunt, play, sleep and repeat! That is the life of an otter. While weasels are highly active mammals, they do require a lot of rest between bouts of activity. The dense, water proof coats of otters allow them to sleep on the ice (after a grooming session of course!).



Overland movements over frozen lakes, streams, and rivers in search of food are undertaken by otters. The classic gallop and slide travel method of otters can be seen in all seasons, but is especially obvious during the winter.



North American River Otter is active all year across its range, from central Alaska to Florida! They prefer big rivers and lakes, but are happy in most bodies of water where they can find food. Otters are very curious and can often be seen periscoping, raising their bodies out of the water to see intruders better.



Family groups of otters are quite boisterous and vocal! Grunts, whistles, and energetic play are great ways to communicate with each other in these groups.



This is an otter skull, recently donated to our Education Collection by Don Kaddatz! As you can see, otters have long, broad snouted skulls. If you look closely at the teeth, you can see very few gaps, as nearly all otter teeth interlock.