SAN FRANCISCO ZOO

Wild About Art and Science

NORTH AMERICAN RIVER OTTER

Lontra canadensis

Order	Carnivora
Family	Mustelidae
Genus	Lontra
Species	canadensis

Geographic Range

Canada, Alaska, Pacific Northwest, Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic coast

Habitat

Rivers, ponds, lakes, lagoons, marshes

Niche

Semi-aquatic, carnivorous, nocturnal (diurnal in undisturbed areas)

Wild Diet

Mainly fish, but will also eat crustaceans, insects, small mammals and amphibians

Life Span

Up to 13 years in the wild, 25 in captivity

Appearance

Dark brown fur on back, lighter brown on belly. Weight is between 11 – 30 pounds, length from head to tail is between 3 – 4 feet.

Adaptations

They are well developed for a semi-aquatic lifestyle with streamlined bodies, webbed toes, dense fur, and nostrils which can be closed when diving. Their strong tails, which can make up to 30 to 40 percent of their body size, help to propel them through the water. North American river otters have a keen sense of smell, in addition to good eyesight and hearing. Underwater, their well-developed vibrissae, the large whiskers around the mouth and nose, help them sense prey.

Fun Facts

North American river otters are fast on land and will also slide on their bellies on snow, ice or mud. They can remain underwater for up to 8 minutes.

At the Zoo

Our river otters, "Trent" and "Pescita," live by the penguin exhibit.

Comparison

Sea otters are slightly larger and heavier than their river dwelling cousins. They spend nearly all of their time in the water and eat mostly shellfish and other invertebrates, such as sea urchins. Unlike most marine mammals, sea otters do not have a layer of blubber and have to rely on air trapped in their fur to help insulate and keep them warm. This fur is so dense, up to 1 million hairs per square inch, that sea otters were hunted for it, almost to the point of extinction. Sea otters are making a comeback and can be found along parts of the Pacific Coast, including Monterey Bay.

Status and Conservation

Least concern – population has stabilized due to hunting regulations, water quality regulations and several successful reintroduction programs.

Threats

Pollution, oil runoff, habitat loss and hunting for fur

Bibliography

Docent Training Notebook, Animal Diversity Web, IUCN Red List

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To see color photos of this animal, go to www.sfzoo.org/wildaboutartandscience