

GAME, FISH, AND PARKS COMMISSION ACTION PROPOSAL

State Threatened and Endangered Species Listings Chapter 41:10:02:04

Commission Meeting Dates:	Proposal	March 5-6, 2020	Pierre
	Public Hearing	May 7, 2020	Custer State Park
	Finalization	May 7-8, 2020	Custer State Park

COMMISSION PROPOSAL

Proposed change: Remove North American River Otter (*Lontra canadensis*) from list of state threatened mammals.

DEPARTMENT RECOMMENDATION

Recommended changes to proposal: None.

SUPPORTIVE INFORMATION

River otters were historically widespread across North America, including South Dakota in appropriate habitats. However, due to habitat loss and degradation and unregulated take during the early 20th century, river otter populations were drastically reduced, including likely extirpation from South Dakota. In 1978, river otters were included on the first list of South Dakota state threatened mammals.

Several factors have allowed river otter populations to rebound across much of their former range, including reintroductions, improvements in wetland and river habitat management, and protections afforded under various state threatened and endangered species laws. In South Dakota, the Flandreau Santee Sioux Tribe released 35 river otters along the Big Sioux River on tribal grounds in Moody County in 1998 and 1999. As part of a study to determine river otter distribution in the state, Kiesow and Dieter (2003) collected 34 confirmed reports of river otter in South Dakota. The majority (89%) of these reports occurred along the Big Sioux River; half occurred in Moody County. Melquist reported in 2015 that river otter distribution included the following: Big Sioux, Vermillion and James River drainages, Jorgenson River, Little Minnesota River, Whetstone River, Yellow Bank River, Jim Creek/Big Slough and the Missouri River downstream from Pierre (Melquist 2015).

South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks (SDGFP), through the South Dakota Natural Heritage Program, maintains a database of river otter reports from across the state. Data are from a variety of sources including universities, government wildlife agencies, private contractors, and the general public. Reports include the sighting of an otter, incidental catch, river otter sign (tracks, scat, or snow slide), or a vehicle kill. Not every river otter encounter is reported to SDGFP and not all reports are verified. The number of verified river otter reports has increased over time (Figure 1). Approximately half of these reports came from Grant, Roberts or Moody counties. The tribal reintroduction, along with natural recolonization from other areas has resulted in a growing river otter population in eastern South Dakota.

In 2012, a 5-year plan was written to provide general, strategic guidance for the recovery and sustained management of river otter. As directed in the plan, recovery criteria were developed to justify removing the species from the state threatened species list when appropriate. Delisting of the river otter will be recommended when the following conditions are met: 1) verified reports of reproduction are documented in three of the five basins (60%) within the recovery area (Figure 2), and 2) within each basin, the presence of river otters has been documented by verified reports in at least 40% of their subbasins. Both criteria shall be met during at least two of the five years prior to recommended delisting. These criteria were met in 2019 (Figure 3). Because protection under the state endangered species law is no longer justified, the Department recommends that the species be removed from the state list of threatened mammals.

APPROVE _____ **MODIFY** _____ **REJECT** _____ **NO ACTION** _____

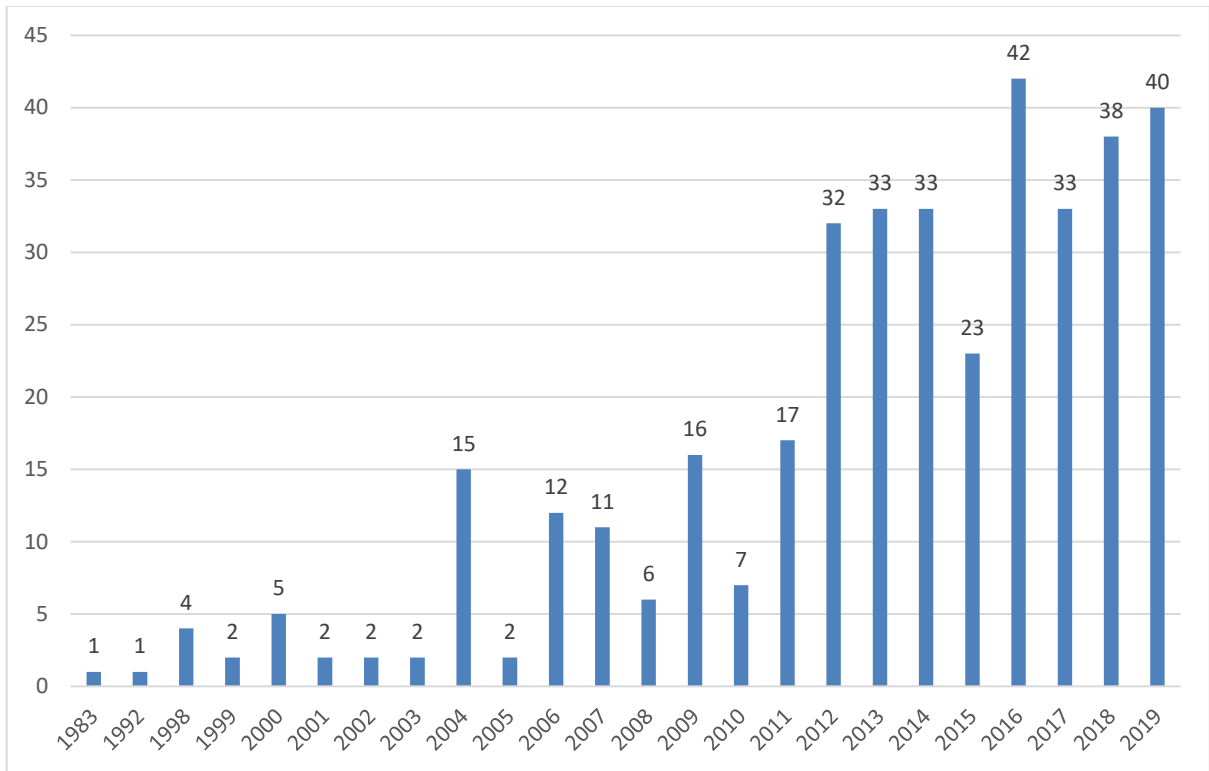


Figure 1. Verified reports of river otters in South Dakota from 1983 through 2019. Reports include the sighting of an otter, incidental catch, river otter sign (tracks, scat or sign) or vehicle kill.

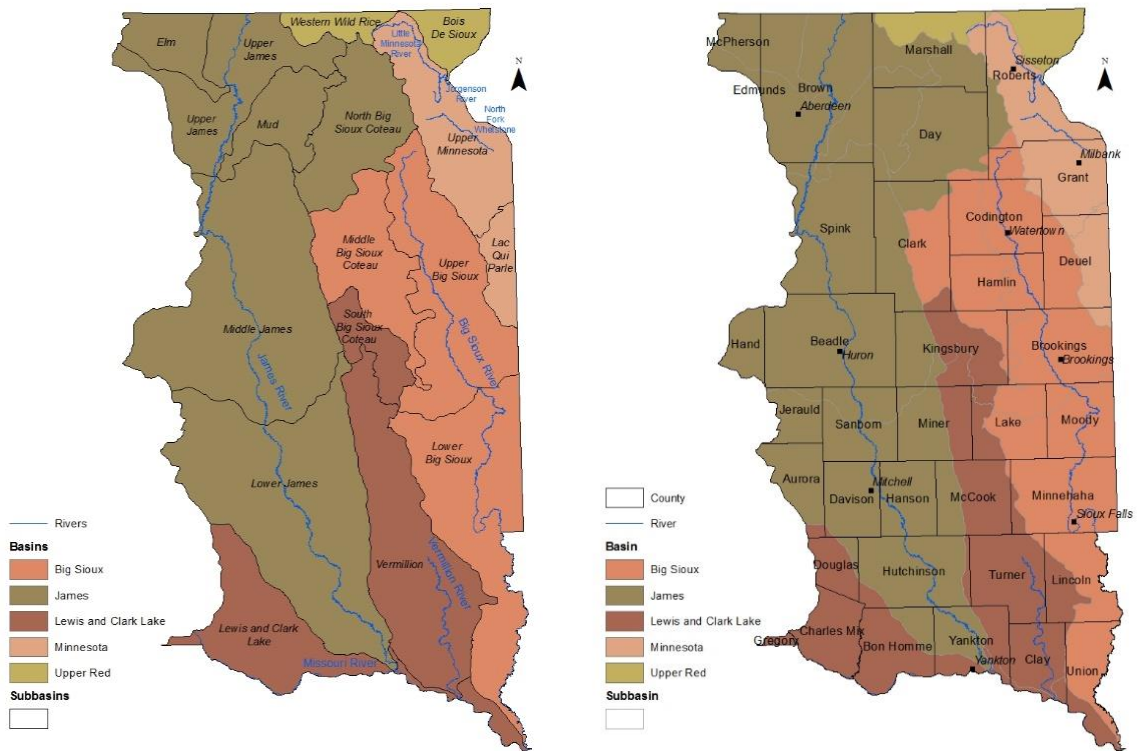


Figure 2. Recovery area watershed basins and subbasins. Basins are hydrological unit level six watersheds while subbasins are hydrological unit level eight watersheds, as defined by the U. S. Geological Survey (USGS) National Watershed Boundary Dataset.

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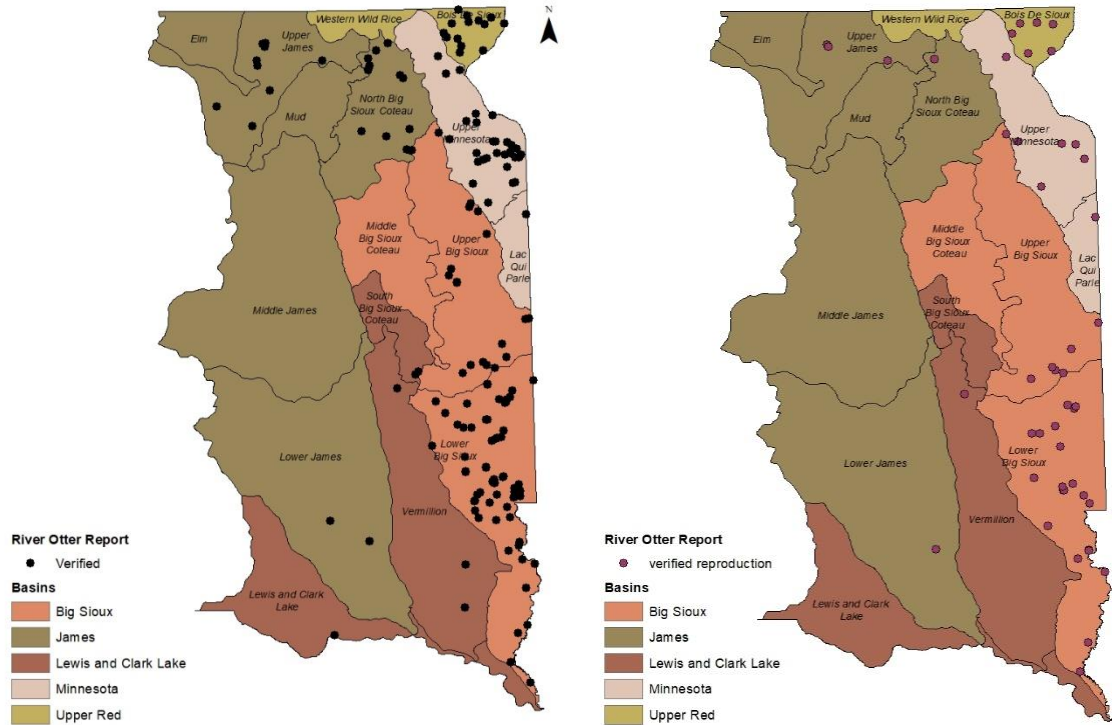


Figure 3. Verified reports of river otters (left) and reproduction (right) across the recovery watersheds in eastern South Dakota from 2015 – 2019. These reports represent a conservative estimate because many reports come from the public, and it is reasonable to assume not every river otter encounter is reported to SDGFP.

Literature Cited

- Kiesow, A. M. and C. D. Dieter. 2003. Status and distribution of river otters, *Lontra canadensis*, in South Dakota. Proceedings of the South Dakota Academy of Science 82:79-87.
- Melquist, W. E. 2015. Determination of river otter (*Lontra canadensis*) distribution and evaluation of potential sites for population expansion in South Dakota. South Dakota Department of Game, Fish and Parks, Wildlife Division Final Report, Pierre, SD.

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