

RIVER OTTERS IN *South Dakota*



INTRODUCTION

Seeing a river otter in South Dakota is a unique opportunity. Although once historically found throughout the state, the river otter is now protected as a state threatened species. Historically, unregulated trapping pressure and more recently habitat loss and degradation have led to declines in river otter populations.

DESCRIPTION

River otters are well adapted to life in the water having a tapered body shape, rudder-like tail, webbed feet, short legs, and dense fur. Ears are small and rounded and set far back on a slightly flattened head. Total body length ranges from 35" to 50". The long tail accounts for about 1/3 of this length. Weight ranges from 10 to 30 lbs. The sides of the head, chin, throat, and chest are a pale brown to brownish-gray contrasting with the deep brown body color.

HABITAT

Otters typically inhabit freshwater streams, rivers, lakes, ponds, and other wetlands with abundant prey (fish, crayfish, etc.) and adequate cover (shoreline vegetation), limited disturbance, and good water quality. Otters are often found in beaver-modified wetlands.

BREEDING

Otters give birth to 1 to 6 (generally 2 or 3) pups in March or April. Young stay in the natal den for approximately 2 months and are weaned at approximately 3 months. Young stay with the female until the birth of the next litter. Females may not have a litter every year. Abandoned beaver lodges or muskrat huts may be used as den sites. Breeding occurs in spring during lactation; implantation is delayed until January or February.

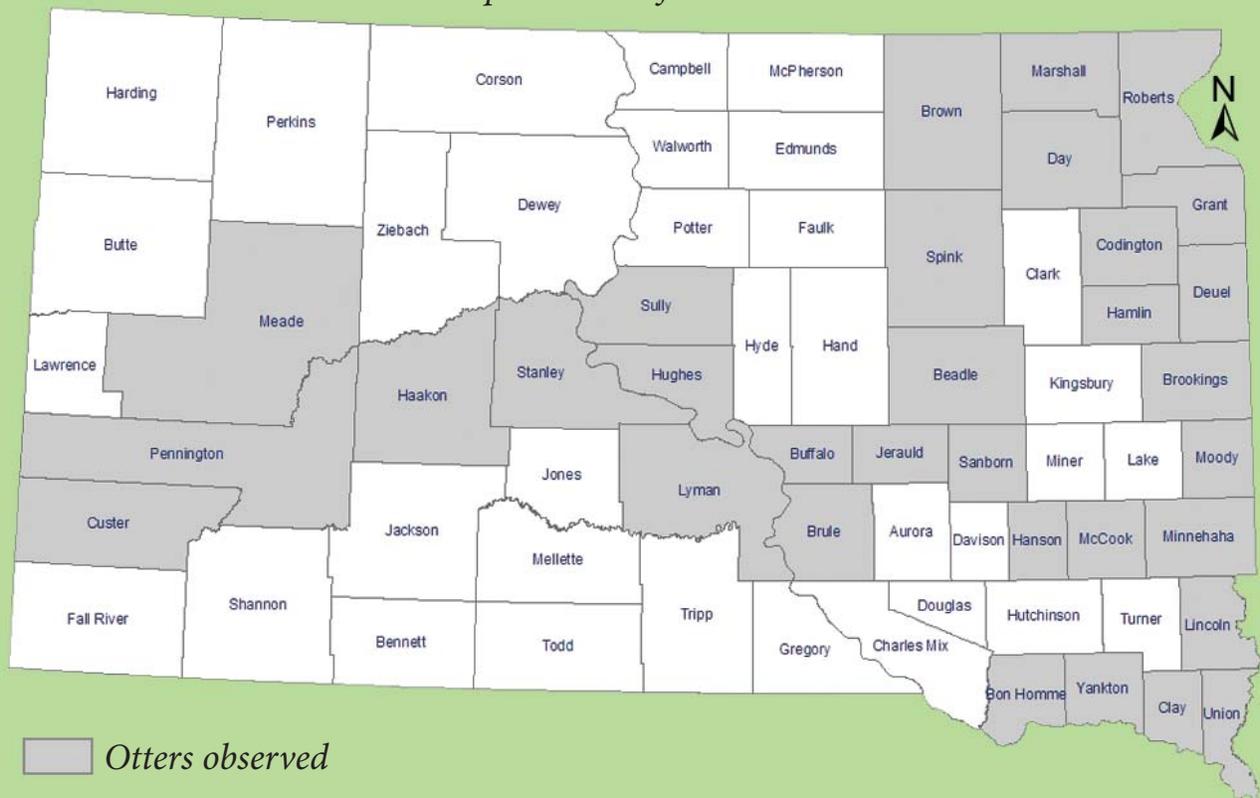


River otter den.

DISTRIBUTION

Where can I expect to find otters? Through the help of wildlife professionals and the public, we know that otters are found in a few areas of the state. Please note that many areas have not been surveyed for otter and may occur in places not depicted on this map. Please report any observation of otters in South Dakota-see Report section.

Presumed county distribution of river otters in South Dakota based upon records from 1979-2010.



AVOIDANCE TECHNIQUES

Because beaver and otter are often found in the same habitat, traps set to take beaver, may also incidentally capture otter. While no technique can completely avoid incidental capture of otter, there are methods that suited to an individual situation may reduce the risk.



River otter scat in grass showing carp scales.



River otter slide in the snow.

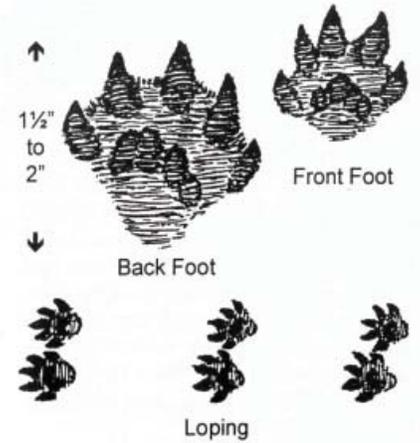
BE AWARE

The best and first step to avoiding otters is to be aware of their presence. Look for sign including tracks, slides, and scat piles. Tracks are similar to mink, only larger (2-3" wide) with track pairs often side-by-side. Webbing may be difficult to see in a track.

Watch for slides on bank sides. When traveling across snow or ice, an otter may jump and slide on its chest and belly.

Scat is dark and often concentrated in piles (latrine sites) near regular landings where otters leave the water. Otter scat may be identified by the presence of fish scales and bones and crayfish parts.

Otters are active early or late in the day, but can be observed any time.



River otter track. Approximately 2.5" with 5 toes and webbed feet.

TRAPPING TECHNIQUES

Trappers should use special methods to trap for beaver (or other furbearers) when otters may be present. Avoid high probability otter travel ways such as dam crossovers, inlets and outlets to ponds or lakes, crossover trails along shorelines, creeks, streams or ditches that connect to another water body, dikes and culverts, and entrances to inactive beaver bank dens or lodges. Be aware that otters are attracted to the same lures (body secretion or fluid) as beavers. Use sets baited with beaver food where possible.

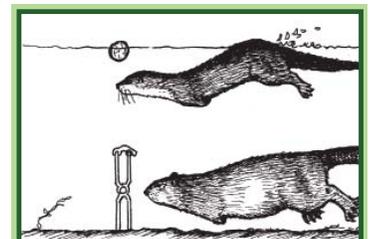
BODY-GRIPPING TRAPS

Otters are most frequently incidentally caught in 330 body-gripping traps. Modify the set of this trap to reduce incidental otter catches by securing the trap deep underwater (at least 2 1/2-3' deep). Also, try floating an item over the top of your set (e.g. dive pole, stick or log; shown below in cross-section). Typically, when the beaver encounters the floating item, it will dive down to the bottom to avoid it and consequently spring the trap. An otter will duck under the obstacle and pass over the trap.

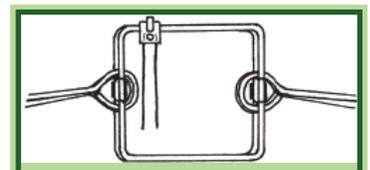
Several modifications to the 330 body grip may reduce the chances of catching otters; shift the trigger wires to either side of the trap jaws ("side-parallel" position; see below) or use a centered, bottom trigger with the wires bent out to the sides at 90-degree angles. Also consider the use of tension-adjustable triggers.

SNARES AND Foothold TRAPS

Snare traps properly set for beaver are the least likely to capture otters. Set your snare loop diameter to 9-10". Add a stop that prevents loops from closing tighter than a 4" diameter. Avoid using a "kill pole" and clear debris from the area to reduce the chance of an otter getting tangled. Foothold traps set in deep water (at least 10-16") away from the bank (at least 16-20") are less likely to catch otters. Carry a catchpole and needle-nose pliers to aid in releasing live otters incidentally caught in a trap.



Setting bodygrip traps deep under water may allow a river otter to go over the top of the trap, while most beaver will dive to the bottom and be caught.



Moving the trigger completely to one side of a bodygrip trap can leave room for a river otter to get through.

REPORTS

IF YOU CATCH AN OTTER

While all South Dakota trappers should try to avoid catching otters, it may occur. If you catch an otter in a trap or snare, release it alive without injuring yourself or the otter. Report incidentally caught live otters via phone, email, or mail. Knowledge of the location of incidentally caught otter helps to monitor their distribution in the state.

If the animal is dead, leave it undisturbed and contact a Department of Game, Fish & Parks representative within 12 hours. Carcasses provide important information, such as reproductive status, age, and health. If the animal is severely injured contact a Department representative as soon as possible.

OBSERVING OTTER

If you observe a live otter, record this basic information: date, location (Township, Range, Section or GIS coordinates), general habitat, behavior and why you think it is an otter. The location information is used to help monitor otter distribution in the state. Submit your report via phone, email, or mail. Please include your contact information.

GF&P CONTACT INFORMATION

Please provide otter reports in South Dakota to a Department of Game, Fish & Parks regional wildlife program manager or Natural Heritage Program (NHP) staff. The NHP is a member of a network of biological inventories known as NatureServe; the NHP is sponsored by the Department of Game, Fish & Parks.

Chamberlain

605-734-4530; 1550 E. King Ave.

Pierre (NHP)

605-773-2742; 523 East Capitol Ave

Rapid City

605-394-2391; 3305 W. South Street

Sioux Falls

605-362-2700; 4500 S. Oxbow Ave

Watertown

605-882-5200; 400 West Kemp



523 East Capitol Ave

Pierre, SD 57501

605-773-3381 | wildinfo@state.sd.us | gfp.sd.gov

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