

THE RIVER OTTER JOURNAL

Volume 1, number 1

Fall 1991

WELCOME TO THE RIVER OTTER ALLIANCE

Welcome to the first issue of the River Otter Journal. It is our hope that, through this newsletter, we will increase public knowledge and appreciation of the North American river otter, (*Lutra canadensis*). River otter populations are currently threatened by industrial and agricultural pollution, trapping, and the continued development of our wild rivers and marshes. Our goal is to promote the recovery and survival of this unique animal through research and education.

On our first "Otter Outing" in July of 1991, we were privileged to watch a mother and her young pups frolicking and feasting on crayfish in the Dolores River in southwestern Colorado. The knowledge that these are indeed a rare animal to observe in the wild coupled with the sheer entertainment value of watching such an energetic animal made this a thrilling experience. We have many great plans for future "otter outings".

Let us respond to the enjoyment which otters provide with our commitment to their future and to the preservation of our wild rivers. Success will depend on our recognition that we are but a thread in the entire tapestry of life and that our own future depends on the health on the whole system.

Here's to the river otter and to our growing number of friends!

Sincerely,

Carol S. Peterson
President

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HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

By Paul Polechla (1990)

During the late 1800s and early 1900s, the combined effect of wetland destruction, pollution, and overexploitation for furs was devastating to North American river otter populations. Other direct causes of otter mortality include incidental take during beaver trapping, drowning in fishing nets, and road kills. Populations were reduced to the greatest extent in regions where:

- 1) human populations were dense;
- 2) agriculture or industrial practices were intense;
- 3) wetlands were naturally sparse (i.e. in semi-arid grasslands of the Great Plains and arid deserts of the southwestern United States);
- 4) oligotrophic waters could not support an adequate prey base (e.g. the north slope of Alaska, northern Northwest Territories, and the northern Hudson Bay region).

Conservation measures implemented at the beginning of the 20th century, namely restricted trapping and hunting seasons, preserving wetlands, and public education, undoubtedly contributed to the initial recovery of the North American river otter populations. The reintroduction and restocking of beavers from the 1920s to the 1950s also had a positive influence on otter populations. Otters benefit from a facultative commensalism with beavers (Tumlison et al. 1982; Reid 1984; Polechla



Figure 1. Original distribution of the North American river otter (*Lutra canadensis*) in the United States and Canada (from Hall (1981) and Polechla (1988)).

POPULATION STATUS

North American river otters are protected in 21 of the United States. Trapping is permitted in 27 states and 11 Canadian Provinces and Territories. Minnesota allows a harvest in the northern part of the state where populations reportedly are large and stable but not in the southwestern part where populations are low. Populations were reported to be stable or increasing in all states and provinces where trapping is allowed. The North American river otter is designated as an extirpated species in Indiana and Prince Edward Island.

By Paul Polechla (1990)

UNITED STATES	LEGAL STATUS			POPULATION STATUS			
	Extirpated*	Harvest Permitted	Harvest not Permitted	Decline	Stable	Increase	Unknown
Alabama		X			X		
Alaska		X			X		
Arizona			X		X		
Arkansas		X				X	
California			X		X		
Colorado			X	X			
Connecticut		X			X		
Delaware		X			X		
Florida		X			X		
Georgia		X				X	
Idaho			X		X		
Illinois			X				X
Indiana	X						X
Iowa			X			X	
Kansas			X			X	
Kentucky			X			X	
Louisiana		X			X		
Maine		X			X		
Maryland		X				X	
Massach.		X			X		
Michigan		X			X		
Minnesota		X			X		
Mississip.		X			X		
Missouri			X			X	
Montana		X			X		
Nebraska			X			X	

☞☞	Nevada		X		X			
	New Hamp.		X			X		
	New Jersey		X		X			
☞☞	New Mexico			X			X	
	New York		X			X		
	North Carol.		X			X		
☞☞	North Dakot.			X		X		
	Ohio			X	X			
	Oklahoma			X		X		
	Oregon	X			X			
☞☞	Pennsylvan.			X	X			
	Rhode Island			X		X		
	South Carol.	X			X			
☞☞	South Dakot.			X			X	
	Tennessee			X		X		
	Texas	X				X		
☞☞	Utah			X			X	
	Vermont	X				X		
	Virginia	X			X			
	Washington	X			X			
☞☞	West Virginia			X		X		
	Wisconsin	X				X		
☞☞	CANADA							
	Alberta		X			X		
☞☞	British Colum.		X			X		
	Manitoba		X			X		
	New Brunswi.		X			X		
	Newfoundland		X			X		
☞☞	Northwest Ter.		X			X		
	Nova Scotia		X			X		
	Ontario		X			X		
☞☞	Prince Edward	X					X	
	Quebec		X			X		
	Saskatchewan		X			X		
☞☞	Yukon Territ.		X			X		

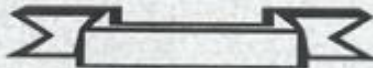
* - "Extirpated" refers to the disappearance of an organism from one region while it still may exist in other regions. This differs from the meaning of "extinction" which is the complete disappearance of an organism.



PREVIOUS RIVER OTTER ORGANIZATION

Many of you will recognise the title "The Brightwater Journal" and its logo (shown above) which was published by the River Otter Fellowship in the early 1980's. This organization is no longer active; however, the work accomplished by this group did much to further the cause of the river otter. The group had over 1,000 members and the newsletter itself won the "Gavin Maxwell Award" from the World Wildlife Fund UK in 1982. Similar to the goals of the River Otter Alliance, the River Otter Fellowship was devoted to "increasing public knowledge and appreciation of the North American river otter, and generating an active concern over its numerous problems".

Publications of "The Brightwater Journal" were discontinued due to time constraints when its founder and editor, Scott Shannon, began his own field research on a group of river otters in Trinidad Bay, California. We hope to include an update on his research in upcoming issues of the River Otter Journal. Through Scott's work with the newsletter, he found that "it was truly heartening to learn that there really is a constituency of people out there who care about otters; preserving their habitat, and restoring healthy populations to places where otters had been extirpated".



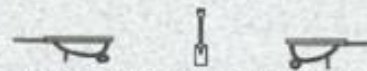


DOLORES RIVER TRIPS

The River Otter Alliance is pleased to announce its acquisition of a commercial, low-water, river-running permit on the Dolores River. Located in the scenic and rugged Dolores Canyon in southwestern Colorado, the Dolores River is the most recent site of river otter reintroductions in Colorado.

This permit allows us to offer "wildlife viewing trips" which will consist of 2-7 days of boating with an emphasis on small group size, low-impact camping, and will be structured to maximize wildlife viewing opportunities, especially river otters. While we certainly cannot promise that participants will see otters, we will make every effort to do so while also stopping to observe den sites, activity centers, etc. Other animals of interest which are also found in the Dolores Canyon include: bobcats, desert bighorn sheep, bald and golden eagles, mountain lion, peregrine falcon, and wild turkeys.

Our permit allows us to run trips during the low water season, which typically runs from mid-June through the summer months. Due to the control of the river flow at the McPhee Dam and the various demands for the water elsewhere, river trips will have to be scheduled according to water flows. River trips are open to all interested parties; members of the River Otter Alliance will receive a reduction in the trip cost. The put-in site for river trips is located only ten miles from the River Otter Alliance headquarters, which is just outside the town of Dove Creek, Colorado.



The River Otter Alliance, in conjunction with the Dolores Canyon Research Center, is currently constructing an authentic adobe building in which to house all of its activities. The site is located two miles east of the town of Dove Creek. We'd like to invite you to stop by for a visit. Warning- you may be coaxed into making a couple of adobe bricks!

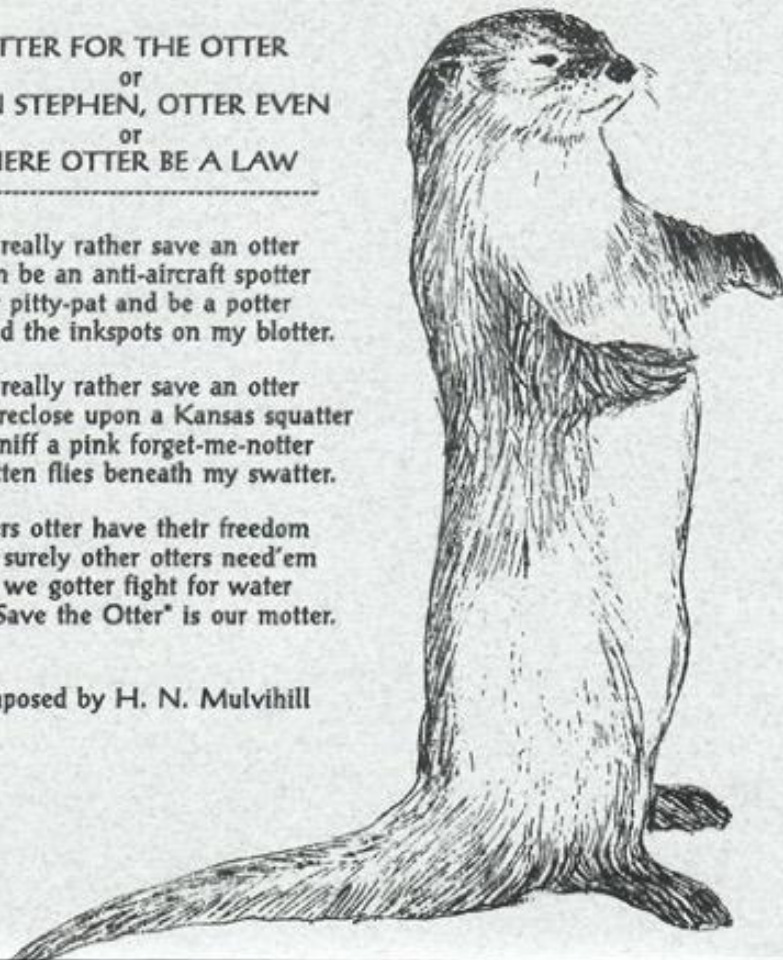
UTTER FOR THE OTTER
OR
EVEN STEPHEN, OTTER EVEN
OR
THERE OTTER BE A LAW

I'd really rather save an otter
Than be an anti-aircraft spotter
Or pitty-pat and be a potter
Or read the inkspots on my blotter.

I'd really rather save an otter
Than foreclose upon a Kansas squatter
Or sniff a pink forget-me-notter
Or flatten flies beneath my swatter.

Otters otter have their freedom
And surely other otters need'em
So we gotter fight for water
And "Save the Otter" is our motter.

Composed by H. N. Mulvihill



Plans Proceed for River Otter Symposium

Though no date or location has been determined yet, we are in the initial planning stages for a river otter symposium. This meeting will provide a forum for presenting research findings and reintroduction results as well as a "think tank" for discussing current issues that concern otters, both in the short term and long term.

Reintroduction topics may include: capture and transportation techniques; release-site selection; radio transmitter methods. Other possible topics for discussion include: water pollution concerns, maintenance of sub-species, habitat degradation, etc.

Depending on the location of this meeting, we will also try to schedule a field outing in an area where otters may be observed (We have several ideas currently as to a good location, let us know if you have a suitable area in mind). We would like to make this meeting open to all interested persons and welcome any suggestions and comments that will help make this a worthwhile and enjoyable experience.

LENDING LIBRARY FOR UNPUBLISHED LITERATURE



The River Otter Alliance is currently setting up a modified lending library which will specialize in river otter literature with an emphasis on reports which are difficult to obtain (i.e. master's thesis and other unpublished reports). Our Spring 1992 newsletter will contain a list of the literature which we have available. Those interested in obtaining literature can send us a check for the photocopying and the predetermined mailing cost (our literature list will include the number of pages) and we will ship the requested literature to you.

Our current collection of unpublished material is not large and we are in the process of expanding the collection. If you can help us out, let us know and we'll send you a check for any cost incurred.

All articles in this newsletter which have been written by Paul Polechla (1990) have been reproduced from "Otters: An Action Plan for their Conservation" of the 1990 International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources, edited by Pat Foster-Turley, Sheila Macdonald, and Chris Mason. Reproduction of this material has been in accordance with directions from the IUCN. We would like to thank them for making this material available.



OTHER OTTERS OF THE WORLD

Otters are members of the weasel family (Mustelidae) and are further classified as the subfamily Lutrinae. Three characteristics are used to classify otters: their vocalizations, shape of the baculum (penis bone), and the appearance of the male external genitalia (Davis 1978). On the basis of these characteristics, nine species of otters can be recognized and organized into the three tribes: Lutrini, Aonychini, and Hydrictini (Chanin 1985).

LUTRINI

This group consists of a single genus and contains three species of otters: The Eurasian river otter (*Lutra lutra*), the American river otter (*Lutra canadensis*), and the marine otter of South America (*Lutra felina*). The Eurasian river otter ranges from the west coast of Ireland and as far east as Japan and as far north as Finland down to North Africa and Indonesia. The American river otter occupies a range over most of North America. The marine otter, or sea cat, is limited to the coastal strip of western South America, mainly along the region of Peru and Chile. The affection call, described as a sort of chuckle, as well as the monosyllabic contact call are unique to this group and distinguish it from the other tribes.

The African clawless otter is found in central and southern Africa, while the Asian species occurs in India and neighboring countries extending eastwards to Borneo and Java. The range of the smooth-coated otter covers much of southern Asia from India eastwards, with an additional isolated population existing in the marshes of Iraq. The giant otter, the largest of the non-marine otters, is confined to South America, occurring in all major river systems from Buenos Aires northwards (Chanin 1985).

The largest of the otter species, the sea otter, was originally found on the coasts and islands around much of the north Pacific from Japan in the west to the islands off Santa Barbara and Los Angeles. Due to heavy exploitation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, however, only a few populations of this species exist in the whole of its traditional range (Chanin 1985).

HYDRICTINI

There is only one species in this group, the spotted-necked otter (*Hydrictis maculicollis*). This species is very similar in appearance and behavior to the North American river otter; the vocalizations are similar to the North American river otter, with the exception of the anxiety call. The

AONYCHINI

This group contains five species of otters. All species in this group lack an affection call and have a disyllabic contact call (Chanin 1985). Members of this group include the African clawless otter (*Aonyx capensis*), the Asian small clawed otter (*Aonyx cinerea*), the giant otter (*Pteronura brasiliensis*), and the sea otter (*Enhydra lutris*).

species occurs over Africa to the south of the Sahara, where they coexist with clawless otters. The species is uncommon but, as of yet, have not been declared as threatened.

Contributed by Cory Cleveland



OTHER OTTER CONSERVATION ORGANIZATIONS

Listed below is a collection of other otter organizations and their addresses. The list is by no means complete; we will provide information on other groups as they become available.

Aktion Fischotterschutz e. V.

Forsthaus Oderhaus
D 3424 St. Andreasberg
Deutschland
(Germany)

FRIENDS OF THE SEA
OTTER

P.O. Box 221220
Carmel, CA 93922

IUCN/SSC Otter Specialist Group
(The World Conservation Union/ Species Survival
Commission)

Ms. Pat Foster-Turley-Chairman
Marine World Foundation
Marine World Parkway
Vallejo, CA 94589



NATION-WIDE RIVER OTTER DATA BASE

The River Otter Alliance will manage a nation-wide data base which will contain information on the location of river otter sightings. This system is intended to supplement and compliment data bases managed by state wildlife agencies.

From our experience, information on river otter sightings often is not relayed for various reasons. The observer may not know whom should be contacted with the information or may not be aware of the importance of the sighting. The River Otter Alliance Data Base will offer a central "clearing house" for information; this information will be available to everyone.

If you have a river otter sighting, please let us know! Include as much of the following information as possible: date, location, number of otters, activity observed, distance from otter, clarity of observation (i.e. through bushes or on open river bank, etc.), general habitat type.

We look forward to hearing from you!

New Members

Wendy Fey - Nederland, CO
Kim and Nancy Malville - Boulder, CO
Ray and Kathi McLean - Dallas, TX
Patrick and Valerie Kenney - Greenwood Village, CO
Heidi Zetzer and Greg Ashby - Goleta, CA
Henry Mulvihill - Georgetown, CO
Siney Wright - Littleton, CO
Sheba Brigade - Liberal, KS
L.M. Deluth - Englewood, CO
Dennis and Nancy McMillan - Santa Fe, NM
Gerard Pesman - Boulder, CO
Linn Cruickshank - Sacramento, CA
Frank and Frances Kasdorf - Fredricksburg, VA
Robert and Jane Nagel - Kittland, WA
George Foxworth - Sacramento, CA
Warren Little - Missoula, MT
Jan Wood - Salt Lake City, UT
Mary Jo Dreher - Denver, CO
Elisabeth Dick - Englewood, CO
Robin Anderson - Steamboat Springs, CO
Paul Polechia, Jr. - Bethel, Alaska
Richard Kylberg - La Jolla, CA
Emanuel and Joanne Salzman - Denver, CO
Joan and Robert Schneider - Bellevue, CO
Mr. and Mrs. D.J. Anderson - Pocatello, ID
Scott Shannon - Arcata, CA
Rick and Cheryl Peterson - Oceanide, CA
I. D. Interiors - Aspen, CO
Charles and Priscilla Lehman - Golden, CO
Lawrence Theis - Denver, CO
Ronald Mason - Denver, CO

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Melquist, W.E., and M.G. Hornocker. 1983. Ecology of river otters in west central Idaho. Wildlife Monograph 83:1-60.

Novak, M. 1987. Beaver. pp. 282-312 in Novak, M., J.A. Baker, M.E. Obbard, and B. Malloch (eds.), Wild furbearer management and conservation in North America. Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources, Toronto, Ontario. 1150 pp.

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Vice President - Leslie Malville
Secretary - John Mulvihill
Treasurer - Joe Powell
Accountant - Charles Lehman
Scientific Advisors:
Joseph G. Hall
Paul Polechla



HELP SUPPORT OUR EFFORTS
AND SPREAD THE WORD!

THE RIVER OTTER ALLIANCE

The River Otter Alliance is a non-profit, tax exempt group which is organized to promote the survival of the North American river otter (*Lutra canadensis*) through education, research, reintroduction, and habitat protection.

All work and efforts for this organization and newsletter are on a volunteer basis by those who share a common concern for the welfare of the river otter and its habitat. We heartily invite all interested persons to contribute at any level of the organization.

By joining the River Otter Alliance, you can help the 'comedian of the river' stage a come back. Your contribution will help to fund research and educational projects. It is an exciting project and we need your help to let other people know about the plight of the river otter. Please pass the Journal on to a friend!



JOIN THE RIVER OTTER ALLIANCE

YES! I want to become a member of the River Otter Alliance.
Enclosed is my tax-deductible check.

Name _____
Address _____
City _____ State _____ Zip _____
Phone (H) _____ (W) _____

Membership Level:

- \$15 Student
- \$25 Individual
- \$35 Family
- \$50 Sustaining
- \$100 Sponsoring

Please make check payable to the River Otter Alliance and mail to:
The River Otter Alliance
P.O. Box 98, Dove Creek, CO 81324-0098

THE RIVER OTTER ALLIANCE

Box 98 - 315 East County Road J

Dove Creek, Colorado 81324-0098

THE DOLORES CHORUS

There once was a pair of young otters,
Who had a son and two daughters,
As they swam the Dolores,
They all sang in chorus,
"Please allow us the flow of our
waters".

Composed by John Mulvihill

Several years of drought in southwestern Colorado prompted our secretary, John Mulvihill, to write this limerick. The Dolores River is the most recent river otter reintroduction site in Colorado. Low water flows are probably the most critical problem for otters in the Dolores Canyon.

JOIN US for the THIRD ANNUAL DOLORES CANYON SKI TOUR

Snow provides a wonderful opportunity to track animals, especially for tracking river otters in their travels on top of a frozen river. On our past ski tours, we have had good luck seeing tracks and other sign and, on one occasion, were fortunate to see an otter as it slid down the bank and into the river through a hole in the ice.

This year's ski tour, the Third Annual Dolores Canyon Ski Tour, is scheduled for January 11, 1992. It will be an informal, one-day tour in the Ponderosa Gorge of the Dolores Canyon. We will be skiing on the frozen river and will be entering a remote region which is inaccessible during warmer periods except by boat or difficult hiking. We suggest that anyone interested should call to make sure that conditions are good (i.e. a frozen river) (303 677-2832).



CURRENT THREATS TO RIVER OTTERS

1. Habitat destruction, including urban and agricultural development.
2. Pollution from a variety of causes including release of heavy metals, PCBs, and pesticides into watersheds, as well as acidification due to mining operations.
3. Harvesting that is not based on adequate population data.
4. Incidental mortality during trapping for other species, especially beaver and coypu.

By Paul Polechla (1990)



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Held Zetzer and Greg Ashby - Goleta, CA
Henry Mulvill - Georgetown, CO
Siney Wight - Littleton, CO
Sheba Brigade - Liberal, KS
L.M. Deluth - Englewood, CO
Dennis and Nancy McMillan - Santa Fe, NM
Gerard Pesman - Boulder, CO
Linn Cruickshank - Sacramento, CA
Frank and Frances Kasdorf - Fredericksburg, VA
Robert and Jane Nagel - Kirkland, WA
George Foxworth - Sacramento, CA
Warren Little - Missoula, MT
Jan Wood - Salt Lake City, UT
Mary Jo Dreher - Denver, CO
Elizabeth Dick - Englewood, CO
Robin Anderson - Steamboat Springs, CO
Paul Polechia, Jr. - Bethel, Alaska
Richard Kylberg - La Jolla, CA
Emanuel and Joanne Salzman - Denver, CO
Joan and Robert Schneider - Bellvue, CO
Mr. and Mrs. D.J. Anderson - Pocatello, ID
Scott Shannon - Arcata, CA
Rick and Cheryl Peterson - Oceanide, CA
L. D. Interiors - Aspen, CO
Charles and Priscilla Lehman - Golden, CO
Lawrence Theis - Denver, CO
Ronald Mason - Denver, CO

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