

TRACKING OTTERS

By
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River otters are primarily elusive, shy animals throughout much of their range in our country. There are, however, some regions, so I have been told, where they may be viewed directly and quite often. Those of you living in such areas are very lucky and can perhaps not only see the otters but also see them making the signs. Most of us are not so blessed so we must be detectives in nature.

OK, otter sleuths, lets begin! The front and larger hind feet of the otter are each endowed with five well-developed toes with partial webbing between each toe. The webbing will not always show in a track, depending on the substrate and the locomotion of the animal. Also, sometimes there can be some spread between the toes with even the heel showing up in a track, thereby increasing the size. Other times, particularly when the animal is running or galloping, it may leave a digitigrade pattern. Sorry, nothing is simple. Look for the five toe pattern in a track but, with experience, even if only a four toe pattern is seen, it can be distinguished from a dog or fox, for example, because canine tracks are symmetrical compared to the otter's, which is asymmetrical. Best advice is to look for the five toes! A good general rule for an otter's tracks are the following measurements: forefoot - 2 to 3 inches wide and 3 to 4 inches long; hindfoot - 3 to 4 inches wide and 4 to 5 inches long. In mud on a bank next to the water, I recently measured one set of tracks which were 3 inches wide by four inches long with tracks 4 inches wide by 5 inches long and another set of tracks which were 2 inches wide by 2 1/2 inches long with tracks 3 inches wide and 3 inches long. This indicated at least two different otters with one decisively smaller than the other - perhaps a female with her young.

What other animal tracks might you confuse with those of the otter? Mink and fisher (where they occur) are similar. The mink's tracks, as is the animal, are smaller than the otter's; both the forefeet and the hind feet will be one to two inches wide and long. If you have fishers in your area, refer to a field guide since the size of their tracks are similar to that of the otters, but, remember, they do not have webbing between the toes.

Although otters do travel across land, particularly to get from one waterway to another, most of the signs you will see will be near water. The most distinct otter slides and tracks I've seen have been during the winter when there is snow and ice covering the waterways. My first truly distinct signs were at the end of November when ice was forming on the river. A series of alternating otter tracks and slides were prevalent in a continuous movement as the animal must have pushed itself across the snow and ice on its belly. The measured tracks were between two and three inches wide and four inches long. Since there was one continuous movement across the ice it indicated only one otter. The slides were eight inches wide and 20 to 30 feet long. When sliding the otter will either coast down an embankment on its belly with forefeet held along its sides and rear feet held out behind or, as in this

case, get a 'running start' and slide on its belly across the ice and then continue by pushing itself when reaching the end of a slide. I often find slides extending from one water hole in the ice to another; these water holes allow the otters to emerge from under the ice to breathe and then return to the water. Sometimes they will make troughs in the snow by pushing themselves with their feet tucked under their bodies so you will see tracks mixed in with the slide. When measuring this type of slide in one area which showed much activity, I found slides that were 6 inches wide and tracks in the slide showing all five toes that were 2 inches by 2 inches. Other slides in this same area were eight inches wide with tracks in the slides showing all five toes that were 3 inches by 3 inches. This indicated at least two different sized otters in this area. Slides of otters can measure six to 10 inches wide with much variance in length depending on the slope and the behavior. Don't forget that melting of ice and snow can affect the measurements! Also, otters do slide in mud so for those of you who do not have snow in your area but do have otters, you can also find slides on mud banks. Sometimes otters slide either down a bank or through a bank hole to reach a waterway so look for these too. Mink will also make slides but the width is only three to four inches.

You may find a set of tracks accompanied by a tail drag, which is another good indication of an otter. I have measured one such sign in the snow with two tracks being two inches wide and three inches long, and two tracks being three inches wide and four inches long, with the tail drag 12 inches long and three inches wide at the base and one inch wide at the tip.

If you find any of the above signs but don't see the otter making them, use your imagination and picture the animal moving and playing in the area. Otters are known to be a very playful species and have been seen sliding down embankments of mud or snow for no apparent reason except to have fun. Make notes of the facts (measurements) then sit down and use your imagination to paint a picture of river otter behavior in the wild! This might help lead you to an understanding and caring of this special species.

Otters come up onto land from a waterway to roll and groom their fur. This helps them maintain the insulating quality of the fur. They may also scent mark the area for use in olfactory communication. These "haul outs" or rolling areas are not always clearly distinguishable unless there are other otter signs in the area. These areas can be found at all times of the year so they may be matted down vegetation or depressions in the snow; those I have found are within about 10 feet from a waterway. Other signs nearby will cinch this one.

Finally, the sign I get most excited about, since it has become an important part of my research, is that of the droppings (excrement) called scat. I have collected over 100 otter scats, and counting. Of the scats that I have collected, the appearance has been either black and shiny or black and mucousy, with no particular shape, containing distinguishable fish bones and having a fishy odor (probably from the anal scent gland); or a dull red color, tubular shaped, with distinguishable crayfish parts; or piles of fish bones in a known otter area or with recognizable scat; or tubular shaped black scat with vertebrate and/or invertebrate parts. These scats have been collected most often on small and

large boulders jutted out into a waterway or next to it, on logs jutted into the water, or on land five to twenty feet from a waterway. From the first 50 scats I analyzed, 59% contained coarse fish scales (& bones) from the Catostomidae family (suckers), 22% contained fine fish scales (& bones) from the Salmonidae family (trout and salmon), 13% contained crayfish parts and the remainder was from various invertebrate.

I hope this information will be helpful to you otter sleuths in finding some of their signs. Remember to carry a pencil and paper to note what you find, a small plastic ruler to measure your clues, a point and shoot camera to photograph what you see and the habitat where you see it, and, if you aren't squeamish, baggies to collect scat. Make this a fun family or friend outing. Then when you get home, put the information (clues) together and see what emerges. If we get some feedback from you all, we could start a section in our publication from your input. You may also add some humor from your experiences, such as one from mine while measuring a mud slide and inadvertently trying it, thus sliding into the muck and water below. Do, however, be careful, but, like the otter, have fun with the experience. Happy otter tracking!

Tracking Field Guides For Further Information

Forrest, Louise R. (1988). *Field Guide to Tracking Animals in Snow*. Stackpole Books, Harrisburg, PA.

Halfpenny, James (1986). *A Field Guide to Mammal Tracking in North America*. Johnson Books, Boulder, CO.

Murie, Olaus J. (1974). *A Field Guide to Animal Tracks: The Peterson Field Guide Series*. Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, Mass.

Rezendes, Paul (1993). *Tracking & the Art of Seeing: How to Read Animal Tracks & Sign*. Camden House Publishing, Inc. Charlotte, Vermont.