
SCIENCE in the Park

River otter

Lontra canadensis

Family: Mustelidae

Carnivore / Predator

Native to Virginia



Long thought to be absent in the James River Park System, American river otters were documented at several locations in the Park in 2014. This playful and curious member of the weasel family lives in ‘holts’ or dens near the water and are crepuscular hunters, feeding on fish, amphibians, turtles, and crustaceans. The river otter is a natural born swimmer and propels itself using its powerful tail and flexible body. While most of its time is spent in the water, it also moves easily on land and can range over several miles daily. This top predator is very sensitive to environmental pollution and habitat degradation, and only thrives in clean and healthy habitats.

Fun Facts

- River otters can stay underwater for up to 8 minutes, dive as deep as 60 feet, and run as fast as 18 miles per hour.
 - The right lung of an otter is larger than the left, to aid in underwater swimming and diving.
 - When underwater, the river otter can close its ears and nose to keep water out.
 - The fur coat of a river otter is composed of two parts: a coarse, waterproof outer layer and a soft inner layer that helps to keep the otter warm.
 - Smell and vocalization are important in the communication and social structure of these playful animals.
-