

RIVER OTTER

Lutra canadensis (Threatened Colorado)



In 2003, the Colorado Wildlife Commission changed the status of the river otter from endangered to threatened.

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MEMBERS OF THE weasel or mustelid family, river otters are about 30-40 inches in length and may weigh more than 30 pounds. The average weight is 18 pounds for males and 15 pounds for females.

Although they appear to be nearly black when wet, which they frequently are, river otters are actually a rich brown on the back that fades into a creamy-white on the belly and chin.

River otters are highly adapted to an aquatic life and they spend much of their time in the water. Their bodies are sleek, their legs are short with webbed feet and their powerful tails supply much of their power for swimming.

Otters feed on a variety of other animals, but they prefer fish and crayfish. They generally take the most easily captured prey, so they tend to eat sluggish forage fish such as carp and suckers.

Otters commonly slide along mud or snow banks rather than walk or run. Often considered as playfulness, this activity is more likely an efficient method of moving around in deep snow.

River otters were once widely distrib-

uted in the major waterways of Colorado, but it's believed that the species became extirpated from the state during the 1900s through a combination of trapping, water pollution and farming activity. Prior to reintroduction efforts, the last known occurrence of a river otter in Colorado was in the Yampa River in 1906.

Between 114-122 river otters were reintroduced to Colorado waters at five sites between 1976-1991. These sites included Cheesman Reservoir, the Gunnison, Piedra, upper Colorado and Dolores rivers. Surveys and sightings indicate that the species is surviving and expanding its range into other adjacent rivers. A River Otter Recovery Plan was finalized in July 2003 and included criteria for both downlisting and delisting river otter in the state. In September 2003, the Colorado Wildlife Commission changed the status of rivers otters from State Endangered to State Threatened based upon results of surveys conducted in 2002 and 2003. The persistence and distribution of otter sign provided evidence that river otters have dispersed from original release areas and have re-established populations in Colorado.