



YOUNG
NATURALISTS

Romp



of Otters

When young otters play together—wrestling, chasing, catching—they are learning how to be good hunters.

By Michael Furtman





I spied an otter slide in the snow. An otter slide? What's that?

When an otter travels on land, it sometimes slides on its belly, scooting along with its short, powerful legs. The otter leaves a nice belly imprint—an otter slide. It looks a lot like the mark you make when you slide downhill on an inner tube.

Do otters slide for fun like you do? I bet they do, because sliding is a fun, fast, easy way to travel.

I discovered the slide while walking in a pine forest. The slide wound its way down a steep hill before disappearing from my sight. Wondering where it went, I followed the trail. It led to the St. Louis River not far from Duluth.

In spite of the cold winter day, the

river's strong currents and rapids kept the water from freezing completely. Near the spot where the otter slide ended, I saw an open pocket of swirling water surrounded by fresh otter paw prints on the snow-covered ice. I also noticed bits of something pink and brown. Looking through binoculars, I saw pieces of crayfish shells. Otters love to eat crayfish.

To me, the water looked dark and scary. I wouldn't want to fall in. But for an otter, the hole in the ice must have been like an invitation to fish for dinner. I knew that this would be a good place to sit and watch an otter in the wild. And that's what I did over the next few weeks in March.

When you're a river otter, your belly is your sled. This otter slides downhill on snow.



THIS PAGE: KEN HUPILA, OPPOSITE PAGE: MICHAEL FURTMAN.



THIS PAGE: STAN TEKIELA, OPPOSITE PAGE: MICHAEL FURTMAN.

A river otter, such as this one at the Minnesota Zoo, propels itself underwater with webbed feet and steers with its long, thick tail.

Master Swimmer

The river otter (*Lontra canadensis*) is born to swim. This furry animal can swim faster than some fish can. Its body is like a long tube made of muscle. Its four short legs end in wide, webbed feet, each with five toes tipped with sharp claws. Its long tail works like a boat rudder steering underwater.

A mammal, the otter breathes air like you and I do. It usually swims with the top of its head above water. It can close its ears and nostrils to keep out water. It can dive deep and stay underwater a long time. How long and how deep? About 8 minutes and 60 feet! Would you like to swim like an otter?

Hanging Out on Ice

One morning by the frozen river, I hid in some bushes near an ice hole about as big as a car. Across the wide river, I could see

a larger opening. Three otters scampered around it, diving in to catch something, then climbing out to eat it. For a long time,



An otter scratches its back on the ice on the St. Louis River near Duluth.

there were three. Then there were only two.

Suddenly the third one popped up in the hole right in front of me. Swimming under the ice and through a strong current, it had covered the 200 yards—more than two city blocks—in just a few minutes.

In the morning sun, the otter climbed onto the ice and shook its long body like a wet dog does. Water dripped off its oily dark-brown fur. Its thick coat provided warmth against the cold water and ice.

The otter rolled onto its back and squirmed like a dog, revealing its silvery belly. Then it did some yoga poses, stretching its legs up into the air. Next, it rolled over onto its stubby legs, stood, and arched its back like a cat does. Finally, it stretched out near the edge of the hole and rested.

Its long whiskers glistened in the sun. Near its nose, the whiskers called *vibrissae* can feel vibrations made by a fish when it swims. Vibrations help the otter find a meal in murky water or in the dark.

Across the river, the other two otters were napping on the ice. Pretty soon, the one near me fell asleep too. All of them napped right next to the holes. Why do you think they chose to stay so close to the edge? What would the otters do if a hungry coyote, bobcat, or wolf dashed out of the woods?

As I watched the sleeping otters, I realized I felt cold even though I was wearing my warmest clothes. I slipped quietly away, glad to move and warm up. I'd come back another day.



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River otters are active year-round. These three young otter siblings gather near open water on the ice of the St. Louis River near Duluth.

▲ Family Affair

Each time I returned to the river, I marveled at how easily the otters caught something to eat. They'd slip off the ice into the dark water and soon come up with something squirming, such as a minnow or a crayfish. In summer when frogs and turtles are active, otters will catch those too. Just about any small critter—even a bird on land—can be an otter meal.

One day, a large otter joined the three young ones I'd been watching. This was their mother. Otters can grow to 5 feet long and weigh 30 pounds. I guessed the moth-

er was about 4 feet long and 20 pounds.

The family of four moved between open spots. With no trouble catching food, they often played or napped. Sometimes they chased or pawed each other. Maybe that playfulness is how otters got their group name: A bunch of otters is called a *romp*.

Occasionally, a young one snuggled up against the mother. Often the young otters, called pups, piled up together and slept in a heap. They usually traveled as a family, though one might sometimes dawdle.

How the Family Begins

Male otters have little to do with their offspring. In late winter and early spring, the male wanders in search of mates. He

marks his territory with scents from his droppings and glands, warning other males to stay away. Sometimes male otters



A romp of otters runs along the snowy shore of the Minnesota River at the Minnesota River Valley National Wildlife Refuge, a 70-mile corridor of land and water stretching from the city of Bloomington to Henderson.

fight over a territory. The male's territory overlaps the territories of several females. He'll mate with all of them if they're willing. After mating, the father otter and the mother otter leave each other alone.

Inside the mother, the fertilized eggs float free for about eight months before they become implanted and begin to develop into baby otters. Then, after another 50 days, in late winter, the mother gives birth to a litter of one to five pups in her den in a hollow log, an old beaver house, or some other shelter.

Pups begin playing when they are 4 weeks old. At 7 weeks old, the pups can swim. They start to poke around their neighbor-

hood, exploring. The mother nurses them for a little while longer. Once they are out of the den, the pups start to catch and eat fish, crayfish, and other meals. One day, the mother will kick the youngsters out of her territory so she can raise her next litter of pups without competition.

During my late winter visits to the otters, the mother was still watching out for her pups. If she spotted me, she'd huff and whistle, and the pups would scurry away.

Mother otter was curious. More than once, after she saw me and had ducked underwater, she'd slowly periscope back up, poking her nose and eyes above water to check me out.



This otter popped up at the edge of a partially frozen marsh. Long, sensitive whiskers help the otter find fish and other prey in dark or murky water.

Not Just Rivers

Although they are named river otters, these aquatic creatures also live in wetlands, ponds, and lakes. They are most comfortable in water, but otters often travel over land from lake to

lake. Just about every lake in northern Minnesota has a visit by otters in summer, and some otters stay all winter. They hunt below lake ice, often using old beaver houses for air and shelter.

Otter Shock

One summer day my wife, Mary Jo, and I were paddling our canoe on a wilderness lake in northern Minnesota. We were cruising quietly alongside tall cliffs. Maybe that's why otters sunning themselves on a rock ledge didn't hear us until

we were below them. To escape, they headed for the water—10 feet down. Suddenly three otters splashed down all around our canoe, scaring us silly.

Mary Jo and I call that the day we saw the Otter Air Force.

Otter Comeback

Before European settlers arrived here, otters swam in most rivers in Minnesota. But then river otters started to disappear.

Beginning in the 1800s, people trapped a lot of otters to make fur coats and other warm clothing. Today trappers follow rules that keep them from taking too many otters.

In the early 1900s, otters lost a lot of their habitat, especially in the southern half of the state. People were draining wetlands to make more land for farms and roads and buildings. All kinds of pollutants ran off the land and ended up in rivers. You can imagine that if your food came from a river and all the critters you ate died because of polluted water, you'd find it hard to survive. That's what happened to otters.

The good news is that in Minnesota, ot-



Otters love to eat many water creatures. This otter has caught a fish on a creek just outside the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness.

ters are coming back. In the 1970s, wildlife biologists with the Department of Natural Resources asked trappers to help catch otters alive in the north and release them in rivers that had been cleaned up in southern Minnesota. It's a good time to be an otter.

So Long, Pups ...

The last time I saw any of the otter family was in early April 2016. Mother otter had disappeared. She was probably in a den with a new litter. The three juveniles were still hanging around the holes in the ice, but they were spending less time together. When the river opened up completely, they'd each travel in search of a new home

territory. The otters could travel a long way on water without facing the dangers of travel on land. Would they go upstream or down? I would never know.

One thing I do know: As long as we keep our rivers, ponds, and lakes clean, we'll always have amazing otters as our neighbors. ♡

OPPOSITE PAGE: BILL MARCHEL; THIS PAGE: JIM BRANDENBURG.

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