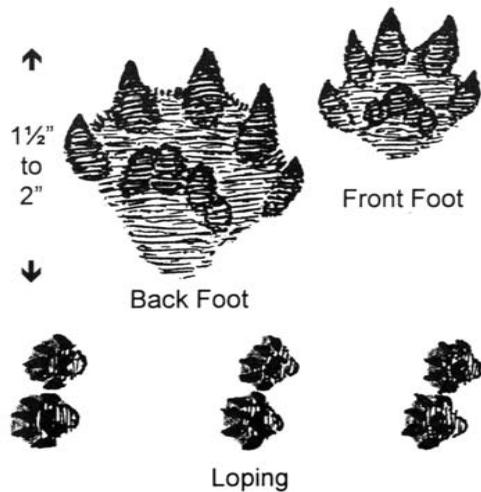


## OTTER SIGN

The first step to avoid trapping an otter is to learn to recognize when otters are present on your trap line. Otter tracks resemble those of a mink, but they are much larger, usually 2 to 3 inches across. Other signs of otters are toilet or latrine sites. These are often found on high points along the banks of streams or along crossover trails between water bodies. The vegetation is usually flattened out, and the area may contain numerous piles of otter scat, often comprised of fish scales or crayfish parts. Otter have large home ranges, and may not return to a specific area for 1-2 weeks. Thus, weathered piles of otter scat are not necessarily an indication they have quit using an area.

Another sign of otter activity is wallows, or 'scratch ups', which they likely use during grooming. These occur along water edges or crossover trails, and consist of an area where the vegetation has been flattened, and raked or scratched into several small piles. Droppings may or may not be present.

In snow, distinct otter 'slides' can be observed where otters slide down a bank or travel between feeding/resting areas. Slide marks often alternate with normal footprints, leaving the telltale "dot-dash" telegraph trails.



## LOCATIONS

Otters can be found in many places. They usually follow streams and other small watercourses, but they will also travel across dry land. However, there are certain places they visit more often than others.

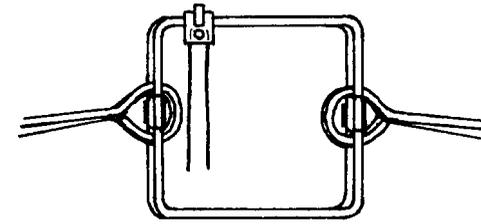
Otters like to travel from one small water body to the next looking for food. Any small ditch, creek, or stream that connects to another body of water is likely to be an otter travel-way. This is especially true of small drainages that lead to or from a marsh, lake, or pond where the otters like to hunt.

In beaver flowages, the entrance and exit to a beaver pond are prone to otter travel. The inlet to a beaver pond has a high potential for otter capture, as does the crossover on a beaver dam. While this may be a good place to catch a beaver, it also has a high potential for otter capture. This holds true for most crossovers along animal travel-ways, like crossovers near culverts or across levees. Other animals also have well worn trails here, and it's likely that the otters will follow the same path on their way through.

Another situation to avoid is an abandoned beaver lodge or bank den. Otters will check these regularly and often use them for temporary shelter when the beaver have moved out. These abandoned dens and lodges are not particularly good beaver sets anyway.

## TRAPS

The large #330 bodygrip traps commonly used for beaver trapping have the highest potential for capturing an otter. One way to reduce the otter-capturing potential of a #330 is to move the trigger wires all the way to one side of the trap and point them straight down. This will give the slender otter the chance to get through the trap, while a beaver will usually fire the trap. Research in New York has shown that this trigger configuration can reduce accidental otter catch by as much as 50%, with no impact to beaver catch rates. In addition, this trigger configuration



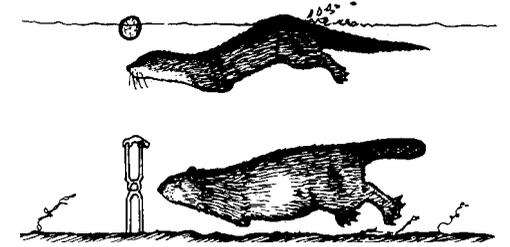
*Moving the trigger to one side of a bodygrip trap increases the chance an otter can get through.*

actually resulted in a greater proportion of large beaver in the catch. You can also add a second trigger to a #330, placing one trigger on each side of the trap, with the wires pointing straight down. An otter is more likely to hit only one trigger, whereas a beaver will usually hit both triggers and fire the trap. There are also some #330 triggers available on which the tension can be adjusted with a bolt. Tightening the tension on the trigger and setting the trigger to one side can help preclude otter captures.

You can also reduce the otter capturing potential of a #330 (or snare) by setting it deep under water. Choose locations that are at least 2 1/2 to 3 feet deep. Put your trap on the bottom and float a dive pole (or poles) over it. When a beaver encounters the pole(s), it is more likely than an otter to dive all the way to the bottom and get in the trap. An otter, particularly in slower currents and/or when just traveling through an area, will tend to just duck under the pole and pass over the top of the trap.

Still, the #330 in any configuration has a high potential for taking otters. If otter sign is present, you should avoid using #330's (or other large bodygrip traps) at key otter locations.

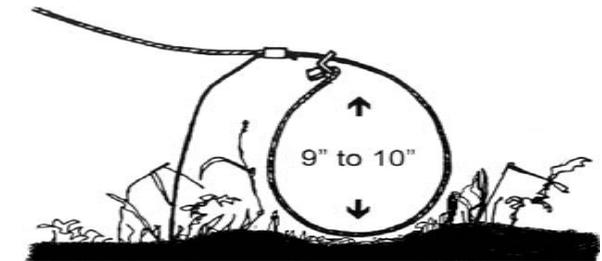
Foothold traps are less susceptible to catching otters, provided they are set deeper under water. If setting near otter travel-ways, or when using castor-mound sets, target hind foot beaver catches when possible by setting traps in 8-10" of water. Foothold traps set in shallower



*Setting bodygrip traps (or snares) deep under water may allow a traveling otter to go over the top of the trap, while beaver will more commonly dive to the bottom and be caught.*

water near castor mounds or crossovers are more likely to capture otter.

Snares, when set properly, may be least likely to take an otter. For snaring beaver, a loop diameter of 9 to 10 inches is often recommended. Most otters will pass through without being captured. On dry land or at the water's edge, keep the bottom of the snare close to the ground to prevent closure should an otter slide across the bottom of the snare – the "wider" beaver will still touch the snare sides and cause loop closure. Positioning the lock further back from top-center may also make the snare less sensitive to closure if an otter bumps it. Finally, consider adding a snare stop that prevents the snare loop from closing smaller than 4-5" in diameter. Most otter will escape, and most beaver will not..



*To avoid otter, consider using beaver snares with large loops, set them close to the ground, and consider adding a snare stop.*

## ADDITIONAL TIPS

The trap sets that show the greatest potential for otter captures are blind sets made in animal travel-ways described earlier. Foothold traps, and especially body-grip traps, set in these travel-ways where otters are present have a high potential for taking otters. Often, a set made nearby, but off the main travel-way, can be very effective in taking beaver, mink, and raccoon, yet avoid the vast majority of otters. Spring is a particularly risky time for accidental otter captures because otter travel long distances during this season. Use extra caution when beaver trapping at this time of year. Even beaver castor mounds, which normally hold minimal attraction to otter, may be visited during spring travels.

When trapping beaver, it is preferable to gang-set active areas, catch the beaver as fast as possible, and leave. Setting fewer traps at a location and checking longer, scattering large numbers of traps at every possible beaver travel-way, or trying to catch that "last beaver" will substantially increase the likelihood of catching an unwanted otter.

Beavers are highly susceptible to lure and visual attractors. Making a castor mound or other baited/lured set just off key otter travel-ways should allow you to take many beaver while reducing accidental otter catch. But again, be mindful of trap and trigger placement at each set location.

When raccoon or mink trapping in otter range, consider making baited dryland sets several feet off the waterway, avoid fishy lures when alternatives may work fine, and avoid blind sets at likely otter travel-ways and crossovers. The "reach-in" type traps are a great alternative to selectively harvest raccoon even at active otter areas. Using small mink-sized bodygrip traps, or placing standard cubby/pocket sets under low

overhead cover, can also be effective at reducing risk to otter when mink trapping.

## IF YOU ACCIDENTALLY CATCH AN OTTER

While all Minnesota trappers must make an effort to adjust traps and trap types, and use sets that minimize the chance of catching otter at certain times and places, it is still possible for an accidental capture to occur. If you catch an otter, and it's alive, carefully release it without causing injury to yourself or the otter. This can be accomplished using a catchpole or a square piece of plywood with a notch cut in it. When using a catchpole, do not tighten the noose more than necessary, as it may cause damage to blood vessels in an otter's neck. But be careful, they're fast and they bite hard!

If the otter is dead, leave it in the trap and report it to a DNR Conservation Officer. Otters are a protected species under Minnesota statutes, but the accidental capture of an otter is **NOT** a violation of the law as long as it is appropriately reported.

Incidentally trapped specimens may be examined by the DNR to provide biological information about age, sex, and reproductive status. In addition, the DNR will make reasonable efforts to ensure that pelts are salvaged. Many pelts, when salvageable, will be provided to a variety of educational facilities and projects.

Trapping remains an important activity to many Minnesotans, and an important wildlife management tool for the Minnesota DNR. We hope the methods outlined here will allow your continued trapping success, while reducing the number of accidental otter captures.



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*Illustrations by Bob Noonan*

# RIVER OTTER AVOIDANCE TECHNIQUES

River otters are common in many portions of Minnesota, less common but increasing in some areas, and remain uncommon in many watersheds. Otter trapping is restricted to certain times and/or places within the State, and otter trapping quotas are in effect. Conversely, beaver trapping occurs statewide, with extended seasons and no quotas, and additional trapping activity occurs during summer to address nuisance problems. Since otter and beaver utilize the same habitat, there is the potential that while beaver (or mink and raccoon) trapping, Minnesota



trappers may accidentally catch otters in closed trapping areas, outside the otter-trapping season, or in excess of

trap quotas. This pamphlet has been produced cooperatively between the Minnesota Trappers Association and the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources to help educate trappers on techniques for avoiding accidental otter catches, with minimum impact to their beaver trapping success. We recognize that no method can completely eliminate accidental otter captures, but we believe the methods discussed can substantially reduce the risk. Continuing education will help improve our ability to manage both beaver and otter populations in Minnesota.