

The Long Island River Otter Project

By Mike Bottini

Are there river otters on Long Island, NY? The last study that attempted to answer that question was done by Paul Connor in the early 1960s as part of a broader survey inventorying all of the species of mammals found on Long Island. It did not find any evidence of otters here at that time.

The river otter (*Lontra canadensis*) was once common on Long Island, utilizing both freshwater and estuarine habitat to hunt for its main prey: fish. Several factors—unregulated trapping, habitat loss, and water pollution—caused a dramatic decline in otter populations over much of its range in North America, and local extirpations in many regions including Long Island. By 1900, otters were completely extirpated from 11 states and one Canadian province, as well as most of New York with the exception of remote areas in the Adirondacks.

The enactment of wildlife conservation laws and water pollution standards and the establishment of wildlife preserves have enabled many wildlife populations to recover, including the river otter. Since the 1980s, there has been an increase in the number of otter sightings and, unfortunately, the number of otter roadkills on Long Island.

In January 2008, with the support of the Peconic Baykeeper, an island-wide survey to document and map river otter “sign” (mainly their scat but in a few cases their tracks were noted) was initiated. Over January through March of 2008 and 2009, when otters are

actively seeking mates and regularly marking their territories with leaf scrapes, jelly-like scent secretions, and scat, over 150 potential otter ‘marking’ sites were surveyed. Evidence of otters was found at 30 sites on Long Island, including several tributaries of Oyster Bay, the Nissequogue River watershed, Arshamomaque Preserve in Southold, Mashomack Preserve on Shelter Island, the Grace Estate Preserve in East Hampton, the Little River in Southampton and the Forge River in Brookhaven.

River otters have very large home ranges, and these thirty sites most likely represent the ranges of less than a dozen otters, including three breeding pairs. Evidence of successful breeding was only documented on the north shore in the Long Island Sound watershed.

Initial results of the study indicate that the island is being slowly recolonized by otters, but much suitable habitat remains unoccupied due to the difficulty of otters to get there. Long Island is very densely developed at its western end, where young otters dispersing from robust populations in Westchester County and coastal Connecticut can reach the island. Mortality from motor vehicle collisions when otters leave the water to skirt around small culverts and dams also poses a formidable challenge.

Phase two of the project will explore management tools that can assist the recovery of this top-of-the-food-chain species here on Long Island. These include designing and installing wildlife-friendly culverts and providing ramps over dams to reduce roadkills, and fast-forwarding the island’s recolonization via a limited reintroduction effort at suitable sites on the south shore and in the Peconic estuary.

You can download a copy of the Long Island River Otter Project’s 2008 report and learn how to help with the survey by visiting www.mikebottini.com.

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What about river otters in Connecticut?

According to the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection, although most Connecticut residents rarely have an opportunity to observe river otters (wild otters generally avoid contact with humans), the state’s river otter population is healthy and stable. For more information on CT populations, visit <http://www.ct.gov> and search for *river otters*.



Robert Sendlein

River Otter (*Lontra canadensis*) with a freshly caught Golden Shiner at St. John’s Pond, Cold Spring Harbor, NY.

Is it a river otter or a mink?

Both river otters and minks are semi-aquatic members of the weasel family. Here are some tips to tell them apart:

RIVER OTTER

Body shape: Torpedo-shaped bodies with short legs, a short snout and small, round ears.

Body color: Dark brown with a silver-brown underbelly.

Weight/Length: 15 to 25 lbs/3 to 4½ feet (from nose to tail).

Tail: Their thick, muscular tail comprises about one-third of their length.

MINK

Body shape: Long bodies with short legs and small ears, but unlike the river otter their bodies are slim and they have a triangular, flat skull.

Body color: Dark brown fur, but have white spots on their chin and chest.

Weight/Length: 1½ to 3½ lbs/1 to 2 feet (from nose to tail).

Tail: Their furry, slender tail is less than one half the length of their body.

Larissa Graham



Mink (*Neovison vison*), like this one spotted on the Mill River in Stamford, CT, also use habitats around the Sound.