Ohio's Thriving Otters: A Comeback Story

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Have you ever seen a river otter here in Ohio? I am sure most of us have not seen these part nocturnal, part crepuscular (active during dusk and dawn) creatures; unless at the zoo. However, the north American river otter has been in Ohio long before we arrived to settle here. We had nearly extirpated them by the early 1900's. It wasn't until 1986 that the Ohio Department of Wildlife produced a 7-year plan to reintroduce the semi aquatic cousin of the weasel to the buckeye state. The red lines on (Figure 1) below are the original watersheds that the initial 123 otters were released in. One can see how far the population has spread since! In 2002, only 16 years after the initial release, north American otters were removed from the endangered species list. The current population in Ohio is estimated around 6,500 otters and can be found in 84 of the 88 counties here.

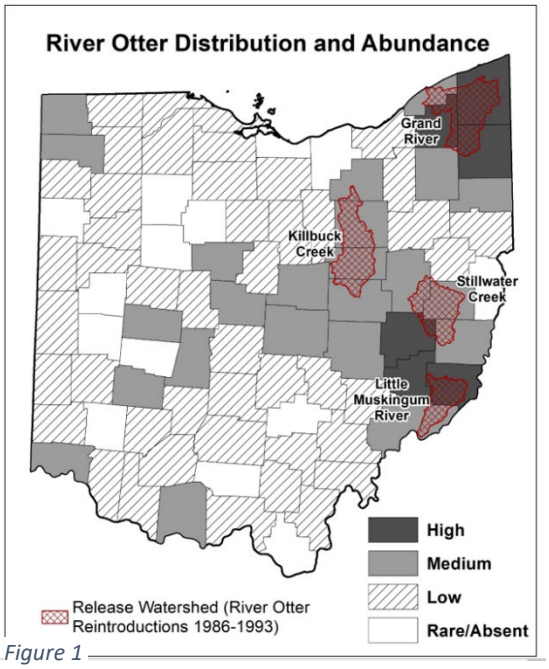

Figure 1

What makes otters so special? Other than their cuteness, they are apex predators in their niche habitats. They have been known to feed on all kinds of prey. Their diet consists of mainly fish, crustaceans, frogs, turtles, and insects. Don't count out the random unlucky mammal either. An adult otter can consume up to 3 pounds of fish in a single day. That is quite an impressive feat, as they are typically only 15-25 pounds as adults. That would be the equivalent of a 150-pound adult human consuming 18 pounds of fish in a single day. Another fascinating fact is how we can determine if a pack of otters is residing nearby. Otters will continually use the same area to defecate. This spot is called a latrine site. Spraint is the technical term used for otter feces. The north American river otter has exquisite underwater abilities that would make Michael Phelps jealous. To see underwater, the otter has developed a transparent eyelid called a nictitating membrane, that covers the eye for protection. On top of being able to see underwater, otters have a double coated fur which acts like an insulation keeping them warm and dry during the cold days of the year, even when in water. It has even been noted that they are able to hold their breath for 8 minutes while diving.

The otters are now thriving in Ohio, with quite a few counties that allow a limited trapping season of them. This is important to make sure the otters do not takeover important areas like fish hatcheries, and smaller ponds. There is still a market for their fur. Sure, there are quite a few

people that enjoy trapping, but I think more people enjoy watching them play. Since the north American river otter is considered to be an indicator species, seeing them thrive means our water quality in the area is doing well! Otters will leave polluted areas, so that is a wonderful sign.

There is a trapping season on river otters which runs from the end of December through the end of February in specific counties throughout Ohio. You can refer to the Hunting and Trapping Regulations for additional information. If issues are occurring outside of the trapping season, river otters can be live-trapped and relocated with permission of the landowner where the otter will be released. You may contact your local district office or county wildlife officer for further assistant if lethal control is needed because of certain conditions. Figure 2 shows the number of otters trapped in Ohio in the 2019-2020 season.

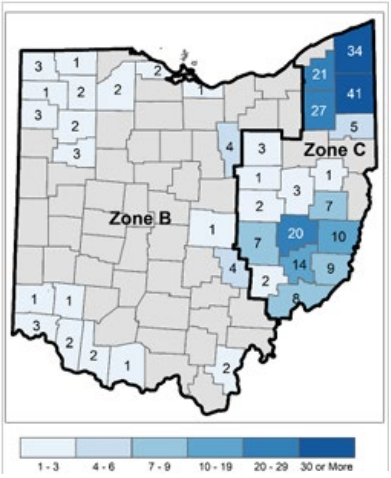

Figure 2

Beyond their undeniable charm, otters are truly remarkable creatures whose ecological significance extends far beyond their captivating antics. From their impressive predatory skills and unique adaptations for an aquatic life, to their role as an indicator species, otters are vital to the health of their habitats. Their ability to thrive, as evidenced by their resurgence in areas like Ohio, serves as a natural benchmark of environmental well-being, particularly water quality. The continued presence and careful management of these fascinating animals not only support biodiversity, but also offer a clear sign that our efforts to conserve aquatic ecosystems are succeeding. Keep your eye out next time you are near the water!