



WILDLIFE NOTES

Otter

Lontra canadensis

A fur-covered cylinder with a bulbous nose and a high degree of intelligence once lived in New Mexico. This northern river otter historically occurred in the upper Rio Grande, the Canadian and the Gila drainages of New Mexico. Unfortunately, development and water pollution have driven this species from the state. Although this animal is trapped for its elegant fur, it is likely that its disappearance here is more closely linked to destruction of riparian habitat for development of homesites and farmlands. Not only was habitat destroyed, but water quality declined as a result of siltation and pesticide residues.

So, what have we lost? A valuable furbearer, an animal of biological interest, and a lot of fun. Biologically, the otter is a mustelid and is related to mink, weasels, wolverines and badgers. Mustelids are unique in having "delayed implantation," meaning that there is an inactive state during pregnancy. After several months in the inactive stage, the embryo implants in the uterine wall and development continues. Why has this phenomenon developed? Is there an advantage? No one knows. We do know that gestation for the northern river otter is 288 to 375 days, of which about

50 days are in the active period. Birth is in the early spring, with litters typically comprised of four young.

Unlike the infamous, bad-tempered wolverine and badger, the otter loves a game. Games are most fun in a group, and here a family of otters excels. Tag, hide-and-seek, keep-away and wrestling may start the day. A muddy riverbank becomes a free-for-all slide that improves with use. Zoom, kerplunk! Then up to the top of the slope for another turn. After a day of sliding, tail chasing, stick juggling, and a few rolls in the grass or snow, it's into a den for a huddled snooze. Play behavior indicates intelligence, and the otter doesn't come up short.

Life isn't all fun and games, although an otter can make meal-finding a pleasant excursion. Otters eat primarily fish and crustaceans.

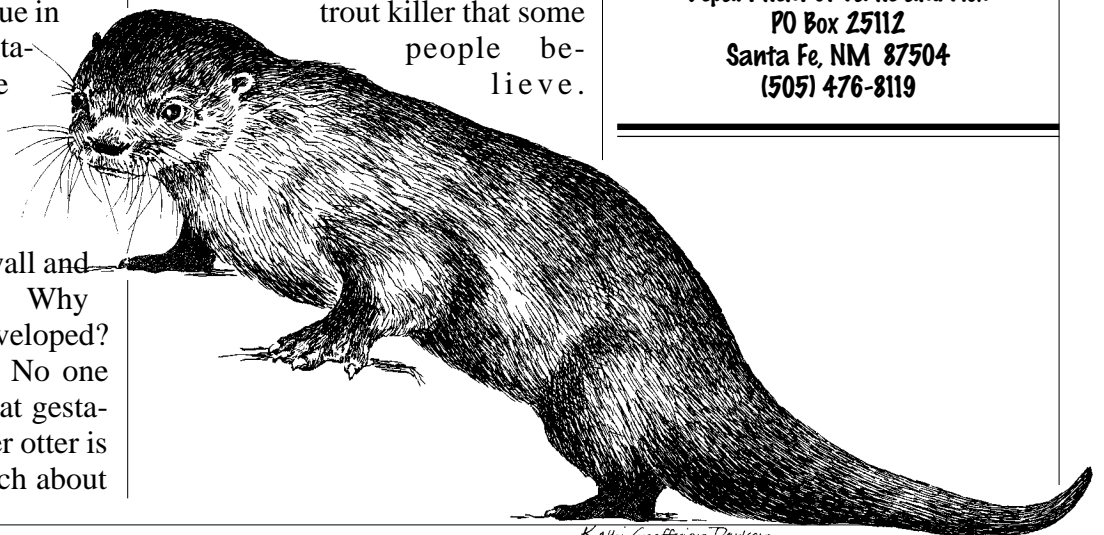
However, the otter is not the trout killer that some people believe.

The otter preys on the fish that are the most available and the slowest. The slower fish include carp, suckers and catfish. Fish that are abundant and are found in large schools, like sunfishes and perches, are also important. The faster fishes, trout and pike, are taken less frequently by otters. Otters also eat frogs, insects, birds and small mammals.

The otter was probably never numerous here in New Mexico, but it is still well established in the Pacific northwest, the Great Lake states, Canada, and the southeastern coastal states.

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