



## NATURE AT RISK

By Carol Hillestad for the Brodhead Watershed Association

### Have you ever seen a river otter in the wild?

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If you have seen the elusive river otter in the wild, you are one of the lucky few.

At zoos, otters are among the most-visited creatures. They play. They swim on their backs and toss sticks and food in the air. They have mock battles, and call, chuckle, and chatter to each other. With their long, slinky bodies, playful nature and appealing faces, they're one of the cutest darned critters ever.



A member of the weasel family, river otters (*Lontra canadensis*) stand about 10 inches at the shoulder. Males weigh between 10 and 25 pounds, and are up to four feet in length, including tail. Otters mate in the water between January and May, but have delayed implantation, so pups are born from February to April of the following year. (The Nature Conservancy photo [nature.org](https://www.nature.org))

But few people catch a glimpse of them in the wild. They're active mostly at night, and they get most of their food from the water — fish, frogs, turtles, water plants — so they spend a lot of time submerged in creeks.

Between the late 1800s and the mid 1900s, they were even harder to find in the wild. In fact, these elegant, sleek, aquatic mammals came close to being eliminated in North America. Human activities — industrial and private water pollution of rivers, creeks and streams, combined with unregulated trapping (for their lustrous fur) — crashed their numbers.

Otters have few natural predators (other than humans). They're much too fast to catch in the water, and on land, they are incredibly strong for their size. Sharp teeth and jaw muscles strong enough to crunch a turtle shell are formidable defenses, too.

By sheer luck, river otters were never completely wiped out in Pennsylvania. And with a lot of work to control trapping and clean up waterways — the otters' habitat — populations started to recover in the 1970s.

Today, thanks to clean water that supports fish and other food sources, their numbers are stable and even increasing in our area. River otters are found in every major river system in Pennsylvania, including the Delaware River.

Let's not get complacent, though. According to the National Wildlife Federation, "habitat destruction and water pollution still put these animals at great risk, especially because they are so specialized."

Keeping our waters clean is the best thing you can do to protect these beautiful denizens of the Brodhead Creek and its feeder streams. Who knows? You may catch sight of a river otter yet.

For more information go to *The National Wildlife Federation* at [nwf.org](https://www.nwf.org) or *Pennsylvania Game Commission* at [www.pgc.pa.gov](https://www.pgc.pa.gov)