



Wisconsin Critter Count: Otter Fact Sheet

OVERVIEW

The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WDNR) performs surveys to generate population estimates for small game, large game, furbearers, and non-game species across the state. This activity will focus specifically on efforts to gather population information about otter in Wisconsin.

The North American River Otter, *Lontra canadensis*, is a semi-aquatic mammal found only in North America. Otters are the largest species of the weasel family measuring in at 3-4 feet long with a 12-18 inch tail. Otters primarily feed on fish and aquatic organisms including crayfish, frogs, and other miscellaneous animals. Though active year-round, otters tend to more active during the day (diurnal) in winter, and more active during the night (nocturnal) for the remainder of the year. Some otters may live in solitude, but they are known to socialize in groups. Known as being playful, otters can be found wrestling, chasing other otters, and playing capture and release with their prey.

AERIAL SURVEYS



Otter slide marks in snow, photo by CBC News

To gather population information about otters, the WDNR previously performed a series of aerial surveys to search for the presence of otter slide marks in the snow. Otter are the only species in Wisconsin that produce slide marks as they slide their bodies along ice/snow. Due to the large geographic area of Wisconsin, the state was broken into a series of Otter Transects within Otter Management Zones for which the aircrafts fly over to produce a **sample count**. Sample counts involve gathering population information about small, controlled areas and using them to produce population estimates for a larger geographic area. This is in comparison to a **total count**, where every individual of the intended geographic area is counted. Due to the nature of these surveys, weather plays a crucial role in determining how valid the data are. Mild winters may not produce enough snow to accurately generate estimates. Additionally, information on otter populations is collected from trappers and road kill incidents. In 2016, the estimated otter population was approximately 11,000 individuals in the state of Wisconsin. The WDNR no longer performs aerial surveys for otter slide marks due to the variable results with weather conditions but believes it can be a great way to learn about the wide range of methods and possibilities to gather population information.



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SNAPSHOT WISCONSIN

Snapshot Wisconsin is a volunteer-based wildlife monitoring project at the WDNR. Snapshot Wisconsin involves a statewide network of trail cameras used to capture images of wildlife year-round. Photos are hosted on a crowdsourcing platform, Zooniverse, where anyone can identify what animals appear on the trail cameras. Data collected from trail cameras produces information about populations, ranges, and behaviors of species. As of July 2018, the project has produced a total of over 22 million photos*.

In the first two years of the project, 360 photos of otter were captured from 29 camera sites. Most of the photos captured were in spring or late fall, especially in November. Additionally, most of the camera sightings took place between dusk and midnight. In the future, it is anticipated that Snapshot Wisconsin data will be able to assist wildlife management decisions across the state by complementing population estimates, group counts, and ranges of species.



Otter captured by a Snapshot Wisconsin camera in Jackson County, winter 2016. →

← Group of otters captured by a Snapshot Wisconsin camera in Sawyer County, summer 2016.



**Statistics as of April 2018, updated numbers can be found by searching keyword "Snapshot Wisconsin" at dnr.wi.gov.*