

Neotropical Otter

Lontra longicaudis

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<http://funzel.org/que-hacemos/fauna-silvestre/nutrias/>

Physical Description

The Neotropical otter, *Lontra longicaudis*, has an elongated body, dense brown fur, and webbed feet. The males are generally 20 to 25% larger than the females (Rheingantz, 2009). The Neotropical otter can reach 3 to 5 feet long and weigh between 15 and 33 pounds (Rheingantz, 2009). The tail makes up over a third of the total body length (Rheingantz, 2009).

Geographic Range



The range of the Neotropical otter extends from Northwestern Mexico to Northern and Central Argentina (Brooks, 2011).

It has been suggested that *L. longicaudis* may be a species complex because the shape of the nose differs between regions (Trinca et al., 2012). A species complex is a group of related species where the distinction between each group is unclear. The species complex may have arisen from incomplete reproductive isolation (Trinca et al., 2012).

It has been suggested for the subspecies to be subdivided by geography: *L. longicaudis annectes* (Mexico, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, Colombia, Venezuela, and Ecuador), *L. longicaudis enudris* (French Guiana, Suriname, Trinidad, and Peru), and *L. longicaudis*

longicaudis (most of South America) (Trinca et al., 2012). However, the subdivision of *L. longicaudis* into subspecies is remains controversial (Trinca et al., 2012).

Habitat

The Neotropical otter is prefers freshwater environments, such as rivers and continental lakes but they may use marine and salt-water habitats (Kasper & Bastazini, 2008). Their shelters are typically self-excavated burrows underneath tree roots but have been found to use rock crevices or caves (Kasper & Bastazini, 2008). The location of the shelter tends to be chosen by amount of vegetation in the area and how easy it will be to dig a burrow (Kasper & Bastazini, 2008). They tend to be located in areas that are soft to dig or have already partially eroded away (Kasper & Bastazini, 2008). The burrow consists of one chamber (Kasper & Bastazini, 2008).

Variable	Used sites (n=21)		Random sites (n=25)	
	Mean	Range (90%)	Mean	Range
Holt characterisation (m)				
Holt diameter	2.6	1.5 □3.8	0.8	0.6 □1.0
Stream depth near holt	0.9	0.87 □1.1	0.5	0.4 □0.6
Distance to waterline	0.8	0.4 □1.1	0.3	0.2 □0.5
Stream characterisation (m)				
Average depth	0.9	0.8 □1.0	0.4	0.4 □0.5
Average width	16.1	14.6 □17.6	13.6	11.8 □15.4
Cover (m)				
Distance to riverbank	4.0	2.6 □5.5	5.2	4.0 □6.3
Distance to talus/rock	6.5	4.8 □8.1	19.4	16.7 □22.0
Distance to vegetation	8.8	6.0 □9.9	8.9	7.3 □10.5
Vegetation cover (%)				
Under-story < 1m	69.5	64.0 □75.0	39.5	28.0 □50.0
Mid-story ≥ 1 m	44.0	36.0 □52.0	38	30.0 □47.0
Over-story ≥ 1.5 m	36.5	27.0 □47.0	56	45.0 □67.0

The above table shows the difference between sites used by the Neotropical Otter and random sites along the same river. As you can see from the table average depth of the water and distance to rocks play an important role for otters when choosing its habitat. Being close to rocks is important for escape cover as well as plenty of vegetation cover (Carrillo-Rubio & Lafon, 2004). The otter also isolates itself from human activities (Carrillo-Rubio & Lafon, 2004). This includes being near cattle ranges. The

cattle destroy otter habitats by grazing because of trampling and vegetation removal (Carrillo-Rubio & Lafon, 2004).



(Left Picture <http://viajesnaturalistas.blogspot.com/2011/04/peru-19-lontra-longicaudalis-vini-vidi.html>) Right Pic(Carrillo-Rubio & Lafon, 2004)

The left picture is a habitat of a Neotropical Otter in the Peru region and on the right is a habitat in Chihuahua, Mexico.

Feeding Habits

The Neotropical Otter does 20 to 30 second dives as it forages for prey (Lariviere, 1999). It devours smaller prey while it is still in the water but will drag larger prey to the shore (Lariviere, 1999). It feeds mostly on fish and shellfish (Alarcon & Simoes-Lopes, 2004). This opportunistic carnivore has also been known to eat insects, reptiles, amphibians, birds, and small mammals (Alarcon & Simoes-Lopes, 2004). There is also obtained data that shows about 3% of fecal samples contain fruit remains (Quadros & Monteiro-Filho, 2000). It may be possible that the Neotropical Otter could be a seed disperser of *Marlierea tomentosa* (Quadros & Monteiro-Filho, 2000). Other areas and more ingested fruits still need to be researched. Normally, they are daytime feeders but they have been known to hunt during the night if humans disrupt their normal routine (Alarcon & Simoes-Lopes, 2004).

Taxonomic Groups	Number of Occurrences	Frequency of Occurrences (%)	Percentage of Occurrences (%)
Fish	108	83.70	67.0
Crustaceans	46	35.60	28.0
Mammals	4	3.00	2.5
Molluscs	2	1.50	1.2
Insects	1	0.78	0.6

This is data from over 400 spraint samples of the Neotropical Otter in an Environmental Protection Area (APA) of Anhatomirim, Southern Brazil (Alarcon & Simoes-Lopes, 2004).

Communication

The Neotropical Otter uses a variety of vocalizations to communicate such as whistles, hums, and screeches (Lariviere, 1999). It is a solitary animal and communicates with others by leaving dung as a scent marker (Lariviere, 1999). They often leave feces in conspicuous places such as logs, sandbars, roots, and rocks. They seem to prefer sites that are high, dry, and near deep water (Lariviere, 1999). They will leave dung in watery places if they cannot find a preferential site (Lariviere, 1999). It is thought that they use feces to coordinate sexual activities (Lariviere, 1999).

Reproduction

The Neotropical Otter only breeds once each year (Lariviere, 1999). Breeding seasons tend to vary by population (Lariviere, 1999). Some populations only breed during the Spring, while others mate sporadically throughout the year (Lariviere, 1999). Pairings only last a single day before the male leaves the female to gestate (Lariviere, 1999). The gestational period is 56 days (Lariviere, 1999). On average, each female will have a litter of 2 to 3 pups (Lariviere, 1999). The female is responsible for taking care of the young (Lariviere, 1999).

Populations

Very little is known on the populations of the Neotropical Otter. There were field surveys and interviews with fishermen and locals in Uruguay from 1999 and 2000. All field surveys were taking costal lagoons of the Uruguayan Atlantic Basin. These results showed that there has been an increase in population size from 10 years ago in that area (Lacomba, Soutullo & Prigioni, 2001). Another population estimated was made of 0.81 to 2.76 otters per km of river in Argentina (Lariviere, 1999).

Predation

Many species prey upon the Neotropical Otter including anacondas, jaguars, caimans, dogs, and birds of prey (Lariviere, 1999). Humans will also kill them for their meat and fur. They often get caught in fishing nets and drown (Lariviere, 1999).

Conservation Status

In past reports, the IUCN has listed the Neotropical Otter as vulnerable. Currently, it listed as data deficient. There have been no recent studies done to evaluate its population distribution. There is no

information about its population size or the number of adults. There is a lot of uncertainty about the cumulative effects that humans have had on its habitat. Threats to it include dams, mines, agriculture, overexploitation, deforestation, and water pollution. This species is likely to be threatened and further research is necessary to calculate its rate of decline.

Conservation Activities

The Neotropical Otter is a protected species in many South American countries including Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Suriname, Trinidad, Tobago, Uruguay, and Venezuela. This means it cannot be killed or harmed. The otter is also on CITES and the ESA in the United States. It is not legally protected in Guyana or Honduras. There is not much being done to help conserve the species. Most of the studies focus on habits and distribution.

Conservation efforts should focus on surveying the current population, identifying important habitats, and protecting the areas with the largest populations. Stricter regulations need to be enforced to prevent manmade pollutants from getting into the rivers.

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