Wildlife Express!

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PLAYFUL RIVER OTTERS

Photo courtesy Terry R. Thomas/Nature-Track.com©2012

IDAHO FISH & GAME

Let's talk about River Otters!

Do you like to sled in the winter? So do river otters! River otters are often seen in the winter sliding down snow-covered river banks. They appear to have lots of fun and even seem to laugh. River otters sometimes make laughing or "chuckling" sounds when they play.

A group of river otters is called a romp. It is easy to see how river otters got this name; otter families are very playful. They like to slide down snow or mud-covered stream banks, chase each other through the water, and even dive after pebbles and sticks they drop in the water. Otters may look like they are just having fun playing with their family, but their play does have a purpose. All that play helps otters develop coordination and gain the skills to be great hunters.

River otters hunt in the water and along the shores of rivers, ponds and lakes. They really love to eat fish. They will eat trout, but tend to catch fish that are not as agile, like suckers. River otters will also eat crayfish, frogs, muskrats and young beavers.

River otters are amazing swimmers. They have many special features that help them swim. One thing that helps river otters swim is their long, thin body. River otters are shaped like torpedoes. They can scoot through the water with ease. They also have webbed feet to help them scoop water while swimming. They can even close their noses and ears to keep water out. With these special features, river otters can dive 45 feet down in the water and stay under water for up to eight minutes! They even have a built in scuba suit – their fur. River otters have one of the thickest fur coats. One square inch of fur has about 156,000 hairs! Their hair is also oily. Water has a difficult time passing over the oil and through all those hairs, so the otter's skin stays nice and dry while the otter is in the water.

Photo provided by Dave Ayers

If you see a large otter with smaller otters, you are probably looking at a mother and her young. Males tend to stay away from the female and young until the young leave the den or are about six months old. River otters have their young in an abandoned animal burrow or abandoned beaver lodge. A hollow log may also serve as a nice place to raise a family. A river otter may have one to six young, called pups. Usually a mother will have two or three pups. River otters are blind and helpless when born. They weigh about five ounces. That's about the same weight as 24 unsharpened pencils. Pups get their first swimming lesson when about seven weeks old. They drink mother's milk until about three months old and stay with mom for about one year. Then they set off to find their own place to live.

Few animals can catch the swift, agile river otter while it is swimming. Coyotes, bobcats or a wolf may catch a river otter on land. Great horned owls and other large birds of prey may catch young river otters. If a river otter avoids trouble, it may live to be eight to ten years old and weight between 10 to 30 pounds.

River otters are very curious animals. If you happen to see one playing along the riverbank, look quickly. River otters may stand up briefly to get a look at you. They may even give you a quick bark or grunt, but they will soon be back on their way, playing, chasing and romping through the water.

Furbearers in Idaho History

Furbearers are animals that are trapped or hunted for their fur. Furbearers are the reason European people first came to this area.

In the early 1800s, fur was used to make coats, hats, gloves and other pieces of clothing. River otters were trapped during this time for their warm, dense fur. They played an important part in the fur trade, but when people talk about the early fur trade, they usually talk about beavers.

Beaver trapping had a huge impact on Idaho history. Beaver hats were very popular. Every man wanted one. Soon beavers were harder to find in the Eastern United States and Canada. This brought trappers to what we now call Idaho.

In 1809, David Thompson built Kullyspell House by Lake Pend Oreille. This was the first European building constructed in Idaho. The house was built for the Northwest Fur Company. Soon other trappers heard about all the beavers in the area. By 1811, four fur companies were trapping beavers and other animals in Idaho. Mountain men that were not members of fur companies were also trapping animals.

At the time, Idaho was unclaimed territory. The United States and Great Britain signed a treaty in 1818 that let people from both countries live on the land, but both countries wanted to own the land. Great Britain operated The Hudson's Bay Fur Company. They wanted to create a "fur desert" to keep the Americans out of the area and claim the land for Great Britain. They thought that if they trapped all the beavers, no Americans would want to live here. Between 1818 and 1827, they trapped 85,000 beavers out of the Snake River alone! Now that is a lot of beavers. Trapping all of those beavers didn't keep Americans out of the area. Russia gave the Northwest Territory, which included Idaho, to the United States in 1824.

Pioneers and homesteaders also trapped animals. Trapping was one way to feed a family and earn money. Some animals, especially beavers, were becoming hard to find. Too many beavers were being trapped. Some people thought beavers needed protection. In 1899, a law was passed that protected beavers from being trapped or hunted. The law helped and beavers become more common. In 1957, people were once again allowed to trap beavers. With proper laws and management, Idaho will always have furbearers.

A Idaho trapper from 1959.

Photo credit Sandpt Cats

Early IDFG Conservation Officer with otter pelts.

The Weasel Family

Members of the weasel family are called mustelids (mus-TELL-ids). In Latin, "mustela" means weasel. This group of animals includes wolverine, badger, fisher, weasels, American marten, mink, and otters. In Idaho, we have eight species of mustelids.

Mustelids are found on every continent except Antarctica and Australia. They range in size from the sea otter that can weigh as much as a third grader to the least weasel which weighs about as much as two pinkie erasers. Wolverines are the largest mustelid in Idaho; they usually weigh between 20 to 40 pounds. Short-tailed weasels are the smallest. They are eight to 14 inches long and weigh two to seven ounces.

Most mustelids have long, slender bodies and short legs. They can fit easily into tight spaces or move freely through the water. Even the bulky-looking badger and wolverine are amazingly flexible and quick. Several species, including the marten and fisher, are excellent climbers. The otters and mink are wonderful swimmers and spend a lot of time in the water.

The long, thin shape of mustelids makes it difficult to stay warm and store fat, so they eat a lot. As a family, mustelids are mainly carnivores. They eat other animals, but they may also eat fruits, berries or plants.

When a mustelid kills more than it can eat at one sitting, it saves the rest for another meal. The leftovers are hidden in a place called a "cache" (cash). When the animal is hungry, it will return to the cache and finish eating its prey.

All members of the weasel family have something in common. They stink! Mustelids have glands located at the base of the tail that make musk. Musk is a strongly scented liquid. Musk may be used to attract a mate. It is also used to mark their homes or territories. The smell tells other members of the same species to stay out! Some mustelids mark their caches with musk. By doing this, they are warning others to stay away from their food. The smell also helps them locate the cache later.

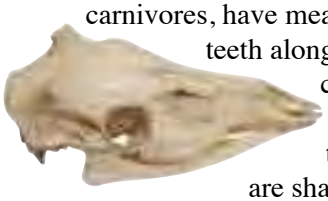

A badger is a member of the mustelid family.

Keep an eye out for mustelids while enjoying time in Idaho's wild lands. These active, curious and strong creatures can be very entertaining to watch!

What's That?

You're walking along a trail. All of the sudden, you see something grayish-white peeking out of the tall grass. Leaning forward you realize what it is – a skull. Now the mystery really begins. What animal did that skull belong to, and how did it live its life?

This may be a hard question to answer, but the skull will give you some clues. One of the best clues you have are the teeth. Teeth tell you what an animal eats. Animals that eat meat need teeth that will help them cut and tear. Meat eaters, called carnivores, have meat cutting teeth along their cheeks. These teeth are sharp and pointed. When the top teeth and the bottom teeth come together, the teeth pass each other like scissors. River otters have no trouble slicing through fish with their teeth!



Sharp pointed teeth may work well for meat eaters, but they sure wouldn't help plant eaters. Plant eaters are called herbivores. Plants take a lot of chewing to break down. Just think how long you need to chew celery! Herbivores have tall teeth in the back of their mouths with flat tops. Flat teeth let the animals slide their top and bottom teeth against each other to grind plants.

We have teeth in the back of our mouths with low bumpy crowns, so do bears. Teeth with this shape belong to omnivores. Omnivores eat both meat and plants, so they need teeth that help cut and grind.

The location of the eye sockets on the skull can also tell you a lot. Predators, animals that eat other animals, need to be able to tell distances. This comes in handy when reaching out to grab a mouse. Predators have eyes that face forward. Prey animals, animals that are eaten by other animals, have their eyes located more to the sides of their heads. This lets them look out for danger in almost every direction, without ever moving their heads.

Looking at these clues may not tell you what animal the skull came from, but it is a start. It may give you an idea of what the animal eats, and whether it is a predator or prey.

Hurray for Hair

Some animals have hair on their bodies instead of fur. Fur is made of two different layers of hairs. Hair is usually just one layer, and all the hairs look alike. Hairs are usually thick and stiff. Deer, elk, pronghorn and you, all have hair.

If you looked closely at a deer hair, you would see that it looks a bit like a straw. The hair is hollow. Animals with fur trap air to stay warm. Well, so do animals with hair. When they are cold, they stick their hairs up. They trap air inside and in between all of their hairs. The air trapped in the hair and in between the hair makes a nice coat of insulation against the cold.

Have you ever gotten goose bumps when you were cold? Look at a bump next time you have goose bumps. You will see a hair sticking up in the middle of the bump. Your body gets cold and tries to trap air by making your hair stand up. We are not very good at trapping air in our hair. Our hairs are too thin and short to trap air.

Many animals grow a thicker layer of hair for the winter. More hair means they can trap more air and stay warmer. Some animals with hair grow a thick woolly layer of special hair close to their skin. Caribou do this. The woolly layer of hair is similar to the underfur that animals with fur have. In the winter, caribou are out in temperatures that can get down to 60 degrees below zero! Now that's cold. Their woolly layer of hair insulates them from the cold and helps to block the icy wind.

In the spring, animals will shed their winter hair and grow thinner summer coats. Animals often look shaggy and strange when they are shedding their long winter coats. People may even think an animal is sick. Once the silky summer hairs grow in, the animal will look good again.

A mountain goat shedding its hair in the spring.

Fantastic Fur

Many animals are covered by what is called fur. You know what fur looks like. Otters, bears and coyotes are all covered by fur. It looks like long, soft hair. However, there is more to fur than meets the eye.

Fur is made up of two different layers of hairs. Guard hairs make up the top layer. Guard hairs do just what their name says. They guard and protect the animal's second layer of fur and skin from weather and water. Often guard hairs are shiny, because animals put oil on them. Animals that spend a lot of time in water, like beavers and otters, don't want their fur and skin to get wet. They might get too cold. Water hits the oily guard hairs and runs off the animals' backs keeping their fur dry.

Some animals, like beavers, have special glands that make oil just for spreading on their fur. Beavers' oil glands are at the base of their tails. Other animals have very small oil glands all over their skin to help keep the guard hairs oily.

The second layer of fur is called underfur. Underfur is shorter than the guard hairs. It is usually very soft and fluffy. Underfur keeps animals warm. Animals fluff up their underfur and trap air in it. The animals' bodies warm the trapped air. The warmed air acts like insulation, and the animals stay nice and cozy. This is what happens when you put on a coat. Your body heats the air trapped by the coat, and you stay warmer.

Some animals with fur also have other special hairs on their bodies. Can you think of any? Porcupines may come to mind. Porcupines have fur with quills. The quills are special hard hairs that protect porcupines from their enemies. When danger is near, porcupines will arch their backs and tuck their heads under their bodies. This makes the quills stick straight up in the air. If an animal tries to touch the porcupine, it will get a nasty poke from the quills. Porcupines cannot shoot quills out of their bodies. Remember a quill is just a hair. You can't shoot hairs out of your head, so porcupines can't shoot quills out of their bodies.

Fur sure is a fantastic way for animals to stay warm during the cold winter.

Be Outside!
Happy Valentine's Day

Are you giving anyone a special valentine this month? It's fun to make valentines to send to friends or give to family. With spring on the way, many animals will be giving "valentines" to each other, but their valentines are not made out of paper! When you are exploring outside this winter and spring, look for these animals and the "valentines" they give to each other.

Great horned owls are some of the earliest nesting birds in North America. They nest in late January and February. This is the time when great horned owls show they are committed to each other. During mating season, male and female great horned owls hoot back and forth to each other. They also bow and rub bills.

Some animals will give food to each other. Barn owls offer their mates tasty mice as a gift. Before the female ever starts to lay her eggs, the male will bring her food. This may be his way of showing her that he is a good hunter. While the female barn owl sits on her eggs, the male will need to bring her food. He will also need to help bring food to the owlets.

Sometimes animals try to impress their cuties by their actions. This is what bighorn sheep do. Rams use their head-to-head combats to establish dominance. Their head butting can put on quite a show for the ewes.

Male shrews get a bit chubby to impress female shrews. Some male shrews double their weight before breeding season. Could you imagine eating so much food that you doubled your weight in just a few weeks or months? You would have to eat tons of food! Female shrews must like their special guys on the plump side.

Some animals offer their mates valentines of dancing and singing. Male crows can put on quite a display. They dance, bow and strut with their wings and tail feathers spread out. While dancing, crows sing a song that is a bit like a rattle. Animals may not give real valentines to their sweeties, but they offer other gifts to show they like each other. Be sure to look for these animal "valentines" outside this winter and spring.

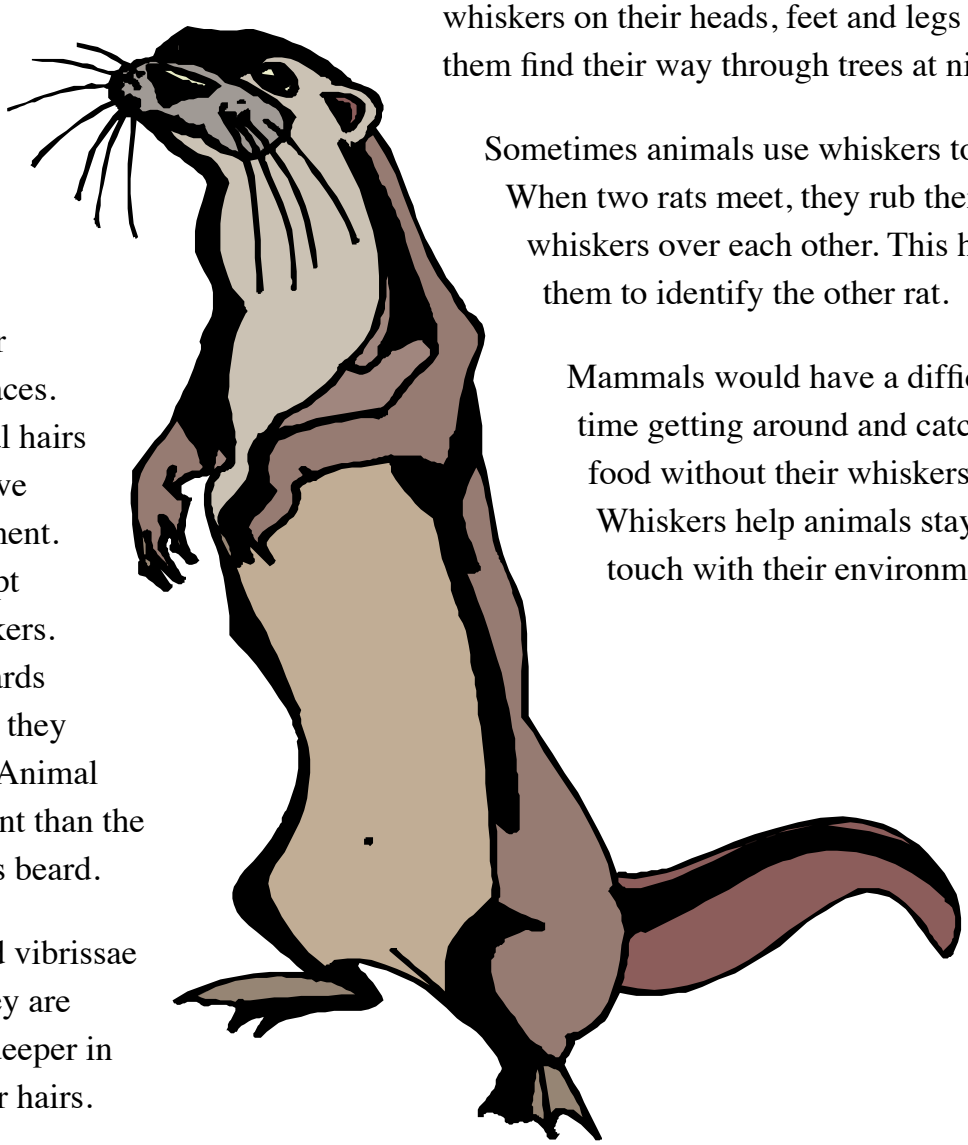
Wonderful Whiskers

River otters have whiskers on their faces that help them while hunting. Other animals depend on whiskers, as well.

Imagine you are an animal hunting during a dark, moonless night. Your eyes, although designed to work in low light, are having a difficult time seeing. You are hungry, and you know a mouse must be nearby. How are you going to find the mouse if you can't see it? Use your whiskers to feel the vibrations caused by the mouse moving.

Whiskers are great tools for animals that hunt in places where it is difficult to see, that hunt at night, or that hunt in dark places. Whiskers are special hairs that are very sensitive to touch and movement. All mammals, except humans, have whiskers. Although men's beards are called whiskers, they are just body hairs. Animal whiskers are different than the whiskers on a man's beard.

Whiskers are called vibrissae (vy-BRISS-ee). They are thicker and rooted deeper in the skin than regular hairs.



Each whisker sits in a sack of fluid filled with nerves. Whiskers can turn in the fluid like a straw in a bottle. When something touches a whisker, the information goes down the hair to the nerves. The nerves tell the brain what the whiskers have felt.

Whiskers not only grow on animals' faces. Cats, foxes and squirrels have whiskers on their ankles. Some bats have them on their rumps, and underground burrowers, like moles, have whiskers behind their ears and on their tails and front feet. Flying squirrels use whiskers on their heads, feet and legs to help them find their way through trees at night.

Sometimes animals use whiskers to greet. When two rats meet, they rub their whiskers over each other. This helps them to identify the other rat.

Mammals would have a difficult time getting around and catching food without their whiskers. Whiskers help animals stay in touch with their environment.

River Otter Word Romp

WORDS

Carnivores
Fish
Guard
Musk
Oily
Playful
Pup
Romp
Trapped
Weasel
Webbed
Whiskers

Across

2. A group of river otters is called a _____.

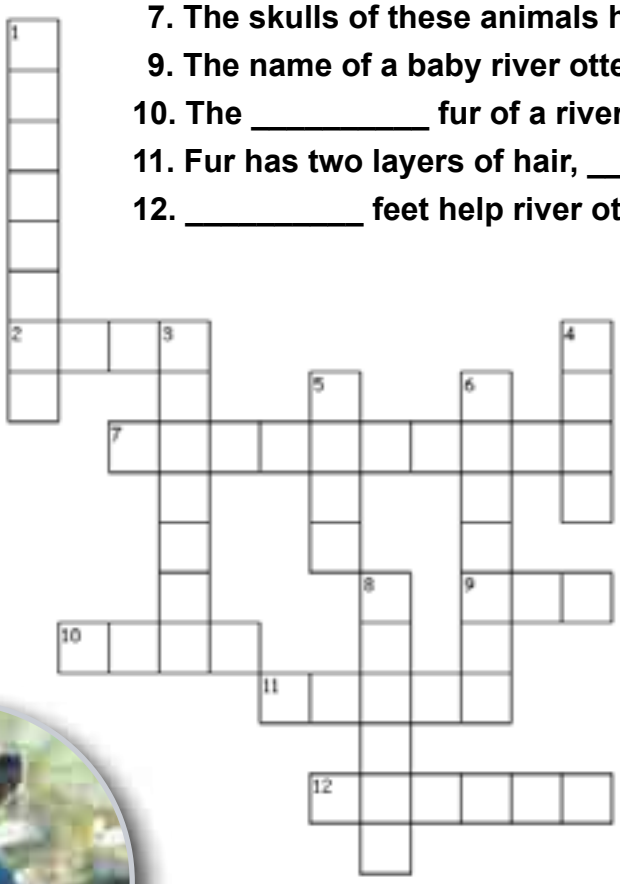
7. The skulls of these animals have sharp, pointed teeth.

9. The name of a baby river otter.

10. The _____ fur of a river otter helps to keep it dry.

11. Fur has two layers of hair, _____ hairs and underfur.

12. _____ feet help river otters swim.



Down

1. Humans are the only animals that do not have true _____.

3. River otters are known for their _____ nature.

4. This is used to mark a river otter's home.

5. A river otter's favorite food.

6. Air _____ inside fur helps to keep river otters warm.

8. River otters are in the _____ family.

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