

River Otter Survey Protocol

Nebraska Game and Parks Commission

Background

River otters were historically found in all major waterways of Nebraska. Unregulated trapping was the likely factor leading to the complete disappearance of otters from Nebraska in the early 1900's. From 1986 to 1991, river otters were reintroduced at seven locations: South Loup River, Calamus River, North Platte River, Platte River, Cedar River, Elkhorn River and Niobrara River (Andelt 1992). Their populations have become established and have expanded from these locations.

River otters are very adaptable. They typically live along wooded rivers and streams with sloughs and backwater areas and ponds. Ideal habitat has year-round open water with a plentiful food supply. Otters have been referred to as a "flagship species" for wetlands and aquatic habitats and are an indicator of wetlands with ample and high quality water (Foster-Turley 1996 and Polechla 2000) and often select sites with the least amount of human disturbance (Wilson 1959, Tabor and Wight 1977, Polechla 1990, Testa et al. 1994). Suitable habitat must also have a sufficient food source available. River otters are generalists. The primary component of their diet is fish but crustaceans are a major component of their diet in Nebraska. Fallen trees, logjams, rock piles, and other structures in the water make good habitat for the otter's prey species and thus good habitat for the otter. Beaver dams create deep pools and slow currents that otters frequently utilize for hunting.

River otters are a highly mobile species and require large amount of space to meet their annual requirements. They are active throughout the year and may occupy 50 or more miles of stream course annually (Andelt 1992) and will often move from one area to another. A single day movement was documented of 42 km (Melquist and Hornocker 1983) but daily movements are more likely less than 10km/day (Melquest et al. 2003). The social structure of river otters is not well defined and appears to vary across its geographic range (Gorman et al. 2006a), so local densities are highly variable as otters may be solitary or in small groups.

While on land, otters will utilize "slides" on steep muddy or snowy banks where they slide down into the water on their bellies. When traveling any distance on a slippery surface otters are known to take a running start and then slide up to six meters (twenty feet).

River otters use dens that were dug by other species such as beaver and will also utilize upland dens such as rock, brush and log piles, hollow logs, or tree root structures. They will use a variety of temporary dens and resting sites and appear to prefer sheltered sites that provide protection and seclusion (Melquist et al. 2003). A female with young pups will typically only use one natal den until the pups are sufficiently mobile and self-sufficient which may take 10 weeks. Gorman et al. 2006b found that natal dens were located in areas protected from rapid changes in water levels. Many of the dens in this study were not in the bank, but rather a distance overland and were most often located below the ground. In Nebraska, female otters enter the natal den beginning in late February through April.

Purpose

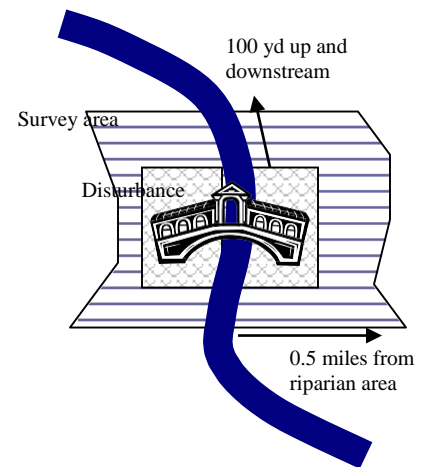
River otter surveys are designed to ensure awareness and resolution to any potential conflicts between the river otters and potentially disruptive human activities. This is a highly mobile species, and if present, is likely to leave during disturbance. However, otters are especially susceptible to disturbance when they have young pups in the natal den. Den surveys, which include presence/absence surveys, are recommended and, upon consultation with the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, may be modified from this protocol depending on the situation. These should be considered when a disturbance will be within 0.5 miles of a river, pond, sandpit, or wetland area where river otters are known to exist or are likely to be present.

Den Surveys

River otter dens are notoriously difficult to find and identify, as they will use dens excavated by other animals as well as brush piles, log piles and uprooted tree structures. For this reason, a den survey should begin by establishing presence/absence for the designated area. If river otters are present, a more thorough search for dens is necessary. Otters are highly mobile, and therefore, presence/absence and den surveys should be done within 10 days of the initiation of the construction activities or disturbance. It may be desirable to conduct two sets of surveys, one month or a season in advance and one within 10 days of the project beginning.

Generally the survey area must include:

1. The entire area of disturbance which includes construction areas, equipment staging areas, temporary roads, etc.
2. An additional 100 yards up and down stream from the edge of the area of disturbance
3. At least 0.5 miles from the edge of the riparian/wetland area upland across the entire area of disturbance. Additional survey area may be necessary depending on the landscape context of the site. Tributaries, wetland complexes, sloughs or ponds may increase the necessary survey area.



Presence/absence can be established by identifying sign (scat, tracks, runs, rolls etc.), by finding slides or latrine sites. Otter scat will vary in size, but can generally be distinguished by fish scales. They often disintegrate into a pile of fish scales and reek of fish (Elbroch 2003). In Nebraska, scat is likely to have crayfish shells and may have bones of mammals, birds, or amphibians. Ideal latrine sites for otters in Nebraska tend to be higher areas near the edge of the water and may include sandbars, bank protrusions, rocks or logs which stick out into waterways or sites where tributaries meet a main stream or body of water. They can often be found right near the water's edge but can also be located higher up on a bank, especially if water levels change throughout the year. Often a latrine will be located near a potential den site. Since otters repeatedly use the same latrine sites, scats will usually be abundant in one site, making them easier to find. Otter tracks are 5 to 7.5 cm (2 to 3 inches) across (Elbroch 2003)

Otter slide marks can be an easy way to identify the presence or absence of river otters. They will slip down the steep banks of a body of water and also when they travel overland across snow, ice, or mud. Bridge surveys or aerial surveys after a fresh snow are especially good times to find evidence of otter activity because the snow provides a slippery surface for an otter to slide and slides imprints can be seen in fresh snow. Otters can take a few running steps and then slide up to six meters (20 feet) on the right surfaces and slopes. Winter otter slides can be an easy way to find if otters are in the area, however, presence or absence in the winter will not preclude additional surveys immediately prior to construction (within 10 days) for these highly mobile animals. In some cases, if otters are present there may be preventative measures that can be used to prevent them from using the area prior to construction.

If otters are established in the area, a thorough survey for potential den sites should be conducted. Any potential dens should be monitored to determine which species inhabits the den. Since they are highly mobile, potential dens should be re-checked 24 hours prior to initiating groundbreaking construction. If a river otter den is found in the area of the den survey, disturbance activities should not proceed or should cease and the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission should be contacted immediately.

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