LONG ISLAND RIVER OTTER PROJECT REPORT

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BACKGROUND
Over the three-month period January through March 2008, a survey was conducted to determine the status and distribution of river otters (Lontra canadensis) on Long Island, NY. Twenty-seven active otter latrine sites were mapped; most were clustered on the north shore of the island’s western end. Although much suitable habitat is unoccupied, and the island’s river otter population appears to be quite small, river otters are re-colonizing Long Island.

In February 2012, a study commenced to examine behavioral and population characteristics of the river otter at coastal sites on Long Island, including seasonal movements and habitat use, and to explore methods of reducing otter-vehicle collisions. Roadkills may pose a significant challenge for the return of the river otter to Long Island.

Winter 2012 Summary
Beginning in mid-February 2012, seven remote surveillance cameras were set up at river otter sites on the north shore of Nassau and western Suffolk (Shu Swamp, Mill Pond and Sunken Meadow) and on eastern Long Island (Southold and Shelter Island).

Otter in Shu Swamp, Oyster Bay. [Mike Bottini photo]
Twenty-eight (28) visits by river otter were recorded at these camera “traps” over a total of 240 trap days between February 12 and April 5 [NOTE: # of trap days = (# of cameras) x (# of days each camera is “on” in the field)].

The Sunken Meadow State Park site recorded the most otter activity (23 visits over 47 trap days). Most camera images were of single otters, but on three occasions the cameras recorded three otters traveling together (twice in Shu Swamp and once at Sunken Meadow). Young otters remain with their mothers for their first 10-12 months, dispersing just before she is ready to give birth to a new litter. Males will also share territories and travel in groups. The relative sizes were difficult to discern among the otters photographed, and it is not known if the threesomes represented adult females with young.

Old otter scat was noted at both of the eastern Long Island sites, but no otters visited these sites during the camera trap period (2/18 – 3/24 for the Southold site and 2/23 – 3/6 for the Shelter Island site).

Three roadkilled otters were found over the winter, all within 15 miles of one another: a young female at Crab Meadow Beach in Northport, another young female on Bayview Road in Oyster Bay, and a third otter (unknown sex and age) on West Main Street (Mill Pond) also in Oyster Bay. In mid-February, a roadkilled adult male otter was found on Staten Island. We are exploring the idea of having signs placed at several locations to reduce wildlife-vehicle collisions.

Camera traps at two roadkill locations have both documented that otters use two different routes to bypass dams: one route is used moving towards the freshwater pond from the bay and another is used to return to the bay. In both cases, the only realistic option for reducing roadkills is to provide an otter-friendly ramp from the stream to the top of the dam.
Although roadkills are very unfortunate events, much useful information can be obtained from the otter carcasses. Age, condition, and reproductive history can be gleaned from the necropsy, and tissue samples can be analyzed for environmental contaminants such as mercury and lead. River otters are top-of-the-food-chain aquatic predators, and the levels of contaminants found in their tissues are excellent indicators of the ecological health of the watersheds they reside in.

All the otter carcasses except the Mill Pond roadkill were sent to the NYSDEC Wildlife Pathology Unit in Delmar, NY for analyses. NYSDEC wildlife pathologist Joe Okoniewski has promised to send a report of his findings. The Mill Pond carcass was illegally disposed of by a taxidermist, and important data was unfortunately lost.

To report an otter roadkill, please contact the NYSDEC Wildlife Office at 631-444-0310 and Mike Bottini at 631-267-5228. Include date, time, and specific location.

The Long Island River Otter Project is supported by:
- Peconic Baykeeper
- Huntington-Oyster Bay Audubon Society
- The Nature Conservancy
- Friends of the Bay
- Group for the East End