

Asian Small-Clawed Otter

Aonyx cinerea

Claws, Paws and Whiskers

These otters have very short claws that do not extend past the fleshy pads of their partly webbed toes making their forepaws very dexterous. They forage with their sensitive paws to locate prey in murky water or mud. They also have stiff whiskers called "vibrissae" that can detect the movement of prey in the water. They catch prey with their paws not with their mouth like other otters.

Musky Warning

Otters communicate mainly through the use of scent marking to establish territorial boundaries. Scent glands near the tail deposit a strong musky scent on their feces. Their scent marked feces called "spraint" is then deposited on tree trunks, trails and rocks. They also communicate with a vocabulary of a dozen calls including a distress call used when they need help.

Classification

Class: Mammalia
Order: Carnivora
Family: Mustelidae
Genus: *Aonyx*
Species: *cinerea*

Distribution

Southeast Asia from northern India to southeastern China, the Malay Peninsula and parts of Indonesia.

Habitat

Small-clawed otters adapt to a variety of aquatic habitats from tropical coastal wetlands to freshwater rivers and creeks as well as mountain streams and even rice paddies.

Physical Description

- Small-clawed otters have a head-body length of 18-24 inches (45-61 cm) with a 10-14 inch (25-35 cm) tail.
- They weigh six to 12 pounds (2.7-5.4 kg).
- They have long, slender bodies with dark gray-brown fur on their body and lighter cream-colored fur on the face and throat.
- They have partially webbed toes and very short claws that do not extend past the fleshy pads of the toes.
- They have broad cheek teeth, small ears and stiff whiskers.

Diet

What Does It Eat?

In the wild: Fish, frogs, crabs, mussels, snails, crayfish, insects, snakes.

At the zoo: primarily a fish diet

What Eats It?

Aquatic predators such as crocodiles and large snakes.

Social Organization

Oriental small-clawed otters are the most social of the otter species living in extended family groups of 12-20 individuals. Only the alpha pair breeds and previous offspring help raise the young.

Life Cycle

These otters form monogamous pairs for life. Breeding can occur throughout the year and mated pairs can have two litters per year. After a gestation of 60 days a litter of 1-6 (usually 2) pups are born in a nesting burrow dug into the muddy riverbank. Males help build the nest burrow and provide food after the pups are born. Otter pups are born relatively undeveloped with eyes closed weighing only two ounces (50 gm). They spend the first few weeks nursing every 3-4 hours. They open their eyes at about 40 days and begin venturing outside the den after about 10 weeks. They begin taking solid food at about 80 days, are weaned at about 14 weeks and can swim at about 3 months. They reach adult size in about 6 months. Lifespan in the wild is 11-16 years.

Adaptations

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Aquatic Adaptations

Otters have long streamlined bodies enabling them to swim rapidly and change direction quickly when pursuing prey. Their muscular tail helps propel them through the water when swimming fast and is also used like a rudder to help them steer. They close off their ears and nostrils when swimming and can dive underwater for 6-8 minutes at a time. They have dense fur consisting of two layers – a soft insulating under fur to keep them warm and an outer layer of waterproofed guard hairs to keep them dry.

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Conservation Connection

IUCN – Near Threatened.

Oriental small-clawed otters are not listed as endangered yet but they are threatened by habitat destruction and conversion for agriculture, draining of wetlands, hunting for their luxurious fur and pollution from pesticides and heavy metals. Even though they are protected by CITES, their numbers are declining. They are considered an indicator species providing a warning of threats to other species that live in the same habitats.

Fun Facts

- Oriental small-clawed otters are the smallest of the 13 otter species.
- Their dense fur has up to 450,000 hairs per square inch.
- Otters are very playful – they are often seen sliding down muddy banks.
- Otters are the only truly amphibious members of the weasel family.
- Each otter's scent is as individual as a fingerprint.
- Otter species live on every continent except Australia and Antarctica.
- In the Harry Potter novels, Hermione has an otter-shaped patronus charm.