

NatureNotes

Bristol Herald Courier

5/3/07

Senah Seagle of Bristol, TN asks, “Could I be seeing otters in Bristol?”

Yes, you could be seeing Northern River Otters (*Lutra Canadensis*) in Bristol. Senah was wondering if that is what she saw at Middlebrook Lake in Bristol, TN. It turns out that Wallace Coffey, a highly regarded birder and naturalist from Bristol, identified a river otter at Middlebrook Lake on Jan. 1, 2006. We had our first record of a river otter at Steele Creek Lake in Bristol on Jan 9, 2007. There were 2 here and we were seeing them off and on for about a month. They were quite a sight. We could watch them from the nature center as they were playing, swimming and catching fish. I sure hope they turn up again. I think the chances are pretty good.

River otters are members of the weasel family. They can reach nearly four feet in length, including their long tapering tail, and weigh up to 25 pounds. They are long bodied and short legged with short, thick brown fur. They are carnivores and spend most of the time in or near water. Fish and crayfish make up most of their diet. They are able to travel long distances on land but prefer the water. They tend to avoid people and are rarely seen. When they are seen they are often found playing in the water or on the shore and may take turns sliding down a bank. I always feel a sense of envy whenever I see them.

There are a few other animals in the area that could be mistaken for otters. American Beavers (*Castor Canadensis*) also love the water. They are in the rodent family and are not carnivorous. They are larger than river otters and have big flat tails. Muskrats (*Ondatra zibethicus*) are another member of the rodent family and are also usually found in or near water. They are much smaller than river otters and have nearly hairless tails. Minks (*Mustela vison*) are in the weasel family and are also often found near water. They are similar in appearance to river otters but are much smaller.

River otters were residents in our area up until about the 1930s. Trapping and hunting had finally taken its toll and they became extinct in the region. For about the past twenty years reintroduction efforts have been working well. It's great to have them back, and with better management and public education it's likely that they are here to stay.

To submit *your* nature question, write to: Steele Creek Nature Center, P.O. Box 1189, Bristol, Tenn., 37621. You can also e-mail jstout@bristoltn.org.

-Larry McDaniel, Naturalist