

# River Otter, *Lontra canadensis*, Food Habits in the Missouri Ozarks

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The reintroduction of River Otters (*Lontra canadensis*) between 1982 and 1992 resulted in widespread occurrence of the species throughout the Missouri Ozarks. This study examined otter diets from the vicinity of two Ozark streams in relation to seasonal and spatial trends. Otter scats (N = 4750) were collected and analyzed from the Osage Fork River and Big Piney River during the summer and winter seasons of 2001 and 2002. During the winter (January-March), fish occurred in 86% of the samples. During the summer (June-August), occurrence of fish dropped to approximately 15% for both rivers. Seven families of fish were identified in the diets, with Centrarchidae being most common regardless of river or season. Within the Centrarchidae, the genus *Lepomis* (mostly Longear Sunfish, *Lepomis megalotis*) was most common, with *Micropterus* (mostly Smallmouth Bass, *Micropterus dolomieu*) and Rock Bass (*Ambloplites rupestris*) also well represented. The mean age of *Ambloplites* consumed ( $\bar{x}$  = 3.3 years) was consistently older than that of either *Micropterus* ( $\bar{x}$  = 2.54 years) or *Lepomis* ( $\bar{x}$  = 2.78 years). Crayfish were recovered from a mean of 85.2% of scats in the winter and 99% in the summer. Smaller fish and crayfish were more common from the upper reaches of the streams while larger fish were prevalent in the lower reaches.

Key Words: River Otter, *Lontra canadensis*, *Lutra canadensis*, diet, food habits, predator, crayfish, fish, Centrarchidae.