

RIVER OTTERS IN OKLAHOMA*

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River otters were reported in three corners of the state in 1800's. Otter populations were apparently severely reduced in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Within the past ten years, otter numbers have increased in southeastern Oklahoma, probably due to emigration from Arkansas and increase in habitat. Sightings and collection locations are given. Stomach contents of two otters were mostly crayfish; newts and fish also were present.

INTRODUCTION

In the winter of 1981-82, four river otters (*Lutra canadensis*) were trapped in southeastern Oklahoma as a result of beaver control activities by a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Animal Damage Control (ADC) Agent. The status of river otters in Oklahoma was unknown and their presence in the state had not been documented for many years. This prompted an investigation into the current status of river otters and a compilation of historical data regarding otters in Oklahoma.

METHODS

A literature review was conducted to collect historical information on otters in Oklahoma. Wildlife agencies in Arkansas, Louisiana, and Texas were contacted regarding otter populations in those states near the Oklahoma border. In addition, selected sportmen, fur dealers, and others who might have observed otters were contacted.

RESULTS

Status. Early historical records document the presence of river otters in what is now Oklahoma (Table 1). Halloran (1) presented records compiled by G. Foreman recording 67 otters being shipped from the northeastern Oklahoma area by A. P. Chouteau in 1834. Harvest locations of these otters are unknown. Marcy (2) reported, "This stream, which I have called Otter Creek, (as those animals are abundant here) rises in the Wichita Mountains. . ." In an appendix of the same report, Marcy listed river otters as occurring throughout the Red River Valley.

On December 3, 1882, an otter was collected at the confluence of Turkey Creek and the Cimarron River in Woodward County (3, and B. Patterson, pers. comm., KU 2077). Halloran and Glass (4) quoted a handwritten report by James A. Grant, a U.S. Biological Survey naturalist. Grant had observed the tanned skin of an otter caught around the spring of 1904 at Mountain View in Kiowa County.

Blair (5) reported that the otter "undoubt-

TABLE 1. *Historical Documentation of Otters in Oklahoma*

Date	Location	County	Comment	Reference
1834	Chouteau Trading Post	(NE Oklahoma)	"67 Otter"	Halloran (1)
1852	Otter Creek	Comanche	"otter abundant"	Marcy (2)
1852	Red River Valley		"occur throughout"	Marcy (2)
1882	Turkey Cr./Cimarron River	Woodward	K.U. 2077	Hall and Kelson (3) and B. Patterson (pers. comm.)
1902	Medicine Creek near Mt. Scott	Comanche	"tanned skin"	Halloran and Glass (4)
1904	Mountain View	Kiowa	"skin"	Halloran and Glass (4)
1938	Spavinaw Creek	Delaware	sighting	Blair (5)
1938	Spring Creek	Mayes	sighting	Blair (5)
1946	Arkansas River	Sequoyah	mount	Halloran (1)

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edly was once common along the streams throughout the state. Today, it is rare in Oklahoma". Blair mentioned sightings, by local residents on Spavinaw Creek in Delaware County and on Spring Creek in Mayes County. Duck and Fletcher (6) offered no data, but stated that records showed that otters once occurred statewide, except possibly in the Panhandle. No harvest records are available since otters have been protected from harvest by state law since 1917. Apparently, no otter specimens were actually documented as being taken in Oklahoma between 1904 and 1946. An otter was accidentally killed in Sequoyah County in 1946 (1).

According to Sequoyah National Wildlife Refuge records in 1971 an otter was sighted on the Canadian Arm of Kerr Reservoir by M. LeFever (then Sequoyah Refuge Manager). In 1975, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service ADC agent accidentally trapped an otter on the Arkansas River near Spiro in LeFlore County (7) (Fig. 1, No. 1). According to Bisonette and Maughan (8), other otters were also observed in 1975 on the Arkansas River in LeFlore County and below Ft. Gibson dam in Wagoner County. They also cited reports of otters seen on the Poteau River and on Hominy Creek in Pittsburg County during the 1970's. Bisonette and Maughan cited a personal communication with K. Podborny regarding a report of otters killed in the 1920's, but this could not be substantiated by personal communication with K. Podborny. During the winter of 1979-80, M. Johnson accidentally trapped an otter on Sans Bois River (Fig. 1, No. 2). On August 8, 1978, S. Oglesby, an ADC agent, trapped an otter on Black Fork Creek (Fig. 1, No. 3) in LeFlore County during beaver control activities. In October 1981, Oglesby trapped three otters in Latimer County on the Fourche Maline River (Fig. 1, Nos. 4-6). In February 1982, Oglesby trapped another otter northwest of Spiro on Redbank Creek in LeFlore County (Fig. 1, No. 7). On December 19, 1982, S. Trahern trapped an otter in a watershed impoundment west of Bokoshe and north of Milton also in LeFlore County (Fig. 1, No. 8).

Several sightings which were unconfirmed but judged reliable have been recorded recently in southeastern Oklahoma. J. Jones, a fishing guide in Broken Bow, sighted otters on several occasions between 1974 and 1982 along Mountain Fork of the Little River. Jones' sightings included observing young otters at a bank den just south of Highway 70 bridge crossing the Mountain Fork. In the summer of 1981, D. Stocker, a taxidermist, observed an otter dead on Highway 51 at the Verdigris River. D. Warren and D. Musgrove, Oklahoma Dept. of Wildlife Conservation employees, observed six otters at the confluence of Black Fork Creek and the Poteau River in LeFlore County July 17, 1982. In September 1982, N. Newman, a Talihina resident, sighted several otters on the Fourche Maline River west of Summerfield.

Information from other state wildlife agencies indicates otter populations near the Oklahoma border in the southeast. Louisiana otter populations have increased dramatically since 1952 (9). Although most otters are harvested from southeastern Louisiana, 11 parishes in north and northwestern Louisiana produced a harvest of 177 otters during the 1980-81 season (9). W. Brownlee (per. comm.) estimated the otter harvest in northeastern Texas at around 20 annually. Otters occur throughout Arkansas except in the upper Ozark region (10). Tumilson et al. further recorded a distributional shift in otter density along the Arkansas River, leading to an increase in otter harvest in the Ouachita Mountain region, especially since 1976.

Food Items. Stomach and intestine contents of two otters from Latimer County were analyzed. Both otters contained predominantly crayfish parts. However, remains of three newts (*Notophthalmus viridescens*) were found in one stomach. This is of interest since newts have toxic skin glands and are

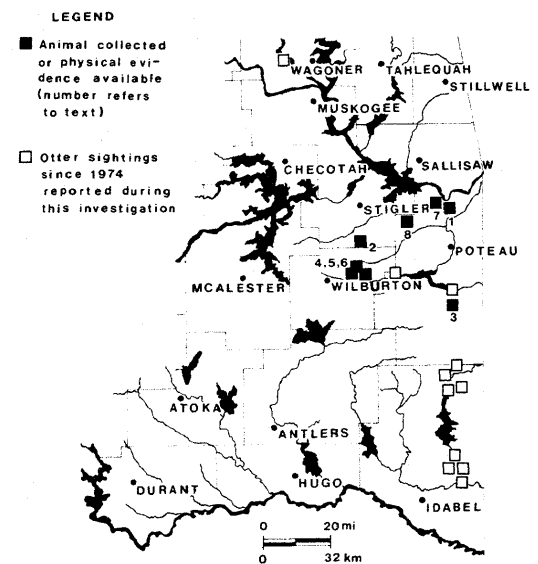


FIGURE 1. Documented occurrences of river otters in Oklahoma.

not usually sought by predators (11). One gastropod and parts of one unidentified fish were also found. Food habit studies in the literature generally list crayfish as a major food item (12, 13, 14).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In the 19th century, otters were documented from three corners of the state and probably occurred statewide. Abundance levels of otters during that period are unknown. In the late 1800's and early 1900's otter populations were apparently severely reduced, presumably due to uncontrolled harvest, although loss of clean water has also been cited (15).

It has not been until the last ten years that otter numbers appeared to have been increasing in eastern Oklahoma. Otters have been sighted or collected on the Arkansas River, Poteau River, Fourche Maline River, San Bois River, and Mountain Fork of the Little River. All these river systems flow out of or into Arkansas and in an area of Arkansas from which increasing otter populations have been reported. It is, therefore, plausible that the increase in otters is due to emigration from Arkansas along these waterways.

Factors relating to habitat have undoubtedly contributed to the otter increase in Oklahoma. Between 1952 and 1976, 1,692 Soil Conservation Service impoundments were completed in Oklahoma, and beaver densities increased dramatically (16). A possible association has been suggested between beavers and increasing otter numbers in Arkansas (10). All otters recently obtained in Oklahoma were taken from areas flooded by beavers. Otters are generally known to inhabit abandoned beaver lodges. It is expected that with adequate protection, the otter range in Oklahoma should expand further north and west into central Oklahoma.

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