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RAISING OTTERS IN CAPTIVITY [1]

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of Wildlife Research

Owing to the lack of dependable experiments in breeding, feeding, and handling otters in captivity, the problem of whether they can be raised on a commercial scale is still to be solved. Otters have been kept in confinement in a number of zoological parks for exhibition purposes, but in most cases they have never bred successfully and produced young. In one or two instances in which young were born, they did not live to maturity. Under exhibition conditions, with the disturbance caused by the presence of visitors, otters do not have the seclusion they require for breeding. No one, however, has yet been successful in raising these animals for fur, and prolonged experiments must be conducted before their production in captivity can be recommended definitely as a promising industry.

DESCRIPTION AND HABITS

The Canadian otter (Lutra canadensis) is found from the northern limit of trees in North America to southern South America, frequenting streams and lakes that contain a good supply of fish. It is a slender brown animal, 4 to 5 feet long, and although too short-legged to move swiftly on land, is remarkable for its grace, agility, and swiftness in the water.

Otters travel surprising distances along streams and across snow-covered country, even though poorly adapted for land travel. The long flattened tail is a powerful propeller, and the large webbed hind feet give additional paddle surface for easy and rapid progress through the water.

As otters are not very numerous, the animals themselves are rarely seen. Their tracks may be observed, however, on sand bars and in the

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muddy borders of bodies of water. The dens are usually made in the banks of streams or lakes below the surface of the water, under roots of large trees, or beneath rocky edges.

Otters are very playful and amuse themselves by sliding down steep banks into the water, using the same place repeatedly until a smooth "slide" is made. They also slide on the snow banks.

FOOD

Wild otters subsist mainly on fishes, frogs, crawfishes, and other aquatic creatures. When these are scarce, they sometimes kill warm-blooded animals. Young otters have been raised in confinement on a diet of milk and cornmeal mush, supplemented by fish or meat as they matured. A reliable source of fresh fish obtainable at slight cost is essential to success in raising otters.

BREEDING

No authentic information is available on the mating season, length of gestation period, and the number of young in a litter. In the Northern States otters probably mate in February. The young are born about 2 months later and are mature when 1 year old. The number in a litter ranges from one to five.

ENCLOSURES

An otter yard should not be less than 12 by 20 feet in size, and should contain a pool of clear water 2 or 3 feet deep, fed from a constant source. There should be sufficient dry land to enable the animals to take exercise and to make a den.

The fence may be built of upright boards, galvanized sheet iron, or 2-inch mesh, 14-gage wire netting. Its height must be 3 1/2 feet greater than the maximum depth of snow. An inward horizontal overhang of sheet iron 1 foot wide must be provided at the top of the fence, and the bottom should extend into the ground 1 1/2 feet.

The den, 2 feet wide, 2 feet high, and 5 or 6 feet long, should be tightly built to exclude drafts. The entrance should be near the end of one of the sides. Dens should be wholly within the enclosure, and it is important to construct them so that they can be opened from time to time for cleaning and disinfection.