



Smithsonian
Environmental Research Center



Scat Scouts & Otter Tracks Field Guide



Welcome to the Scat Scout team!

We are so excited about your interest in learning about and helping to collect data about the North American river otter! We know that river otters live in the Chesapeake Bay, but now they are popping up in places across the Bay that haven't been spotted in over 40 years! This guide is designed to help you with identifying river otter latrines. A latrine is like social media for otters – it conveys information like how many otters live here, if they are male or female, and their health. Below is a guide for identifying three main signs of otter latrines: 1) **scat**, 2) **footprints**, and 3) **scrapes**.

BEFORE YOU HEAD OUT

Be sure that before you start looking for otter latrines that you follow these steps first:

- Get permission to look for them on any property that is not your own
- Read this guide and study the pictures
- Know the types of areas you should be looking. Most river otter latrines are within 30 ft. (or 10 m) of the shoreline. Additionally, otters will use manmade structures (e.g., docks, walkways) and natural areas (e.g., marshes, grassy areas, forested areas) for latrines.
- Dress appropriately, if you are walking in tall grasses or forested areas – use insect repellent. Also carry water and a means of communication.
- Check the weather before you go out, and let someone know where you're going

WHAT DO I DO IF I FIND OTTER SIGNS, SEE AN OTTER, OR SPOT A LATRINE?

- Take a picture and record your location.
- Leave the otter, samples, or scat alone, but observe it to be sure it is what you think.
- Report your sighting on iNaturalist to contribute to the project.



River Otter Scat

- 1) River otter scat has a poorly defined shape- it looks like a splat. In contrast to the log-like shape of dog scat, otter scat has a higher water content and is spread out, more akin to the consistency of diarrhea.
- 2) River otter scat contains large chunks of undigested food because otters don't chew their food very well. Fish are most common prey item for most river otters, so some of these "chunks" may be fish scales or fish bones.
- 3) River otter poop gets lighter over time. So it starts out pretty dark in color, but once it has been there a while, it may look more white or gray than brown.

Here are examples of river otter scat.



River otter scat looks like a splat:

Old scat left on a wooden dock. As with all fecal matter, the river otter scat will degrade over time. Unfortunately, we can't tell how old a scat sample is just by looking at it.



River otter scat on grass. The gray, chunky stuff is scat. In this example, the scat is full of fish scales. It often has an intense fishy smell.



River otter scat on a log. It is spread across the width of the log, full of fish scales, and may even have a fishy smell.

Scat from other animals

Many types of scat can be found in or around river otter latrines. Don't be fooled by these poop-posters. Check out the pictures and descriptions below.



Raccoon scat: Look for log of Tootsie roll shapes, with flat ends, about 3 – 6 " long. Usually full of seeds, corn, or berries. Often on rocks or the middle of trails.



Fox scat: Look for a Tootsie roll shape but with pointy or tapered ends. Usually full of bones, fur, or insect parts. It is about 3 – 6" long.



Goose scat: Look for green or greenish black color with some white, usually long and curved, or in piles and full of grass or plant matter. Older scat may appear white. Can be 2-3" long.



Deer scat: Look for brown or black bean or marble shapes, sometimes in clumps, no clear vegetation or plants in it. Can be 5-12" long.

River Otter Tracks

River otter tracks or paw prints have a distinct, recognizable shape. Look for:

- 1) Five toes and a large rear pad
- 2) Toes partially webbed (sometimes shows in tracks)
- 3) Claws are usually evident (makes toes look pointed)
- 4) Sometimes tracks overlap
- 5) Sometimes heel pad is defined

Here are examples of river otter paw prints and tracks found across a variety types of surfaces. The best places to look for otter tracks are on muddy or sandy river banks or docks next to mud.



River otter tracks in the sand. All five toes are present and the pointed tip on each toe from the claws.

Front and rear feet: about 3 $\frac{3}{4}$ " X 3 $\frac{3}{4}$ "



Muddy river otter tracks on a wood dock.

These muddy paw prints are less well-defined due to, but the five toes, large size, and presence of claws are noted.



A river otter track on a sandy ground. The tracks are large in size, with five toes that have pointed tips (from the claws).

Other Animal Tracks

Other critters also leave behind tracks or pawprints with distinct, recognizable shapes. Don't be fooled!



Raccoon tracks on a sandy ground. There are five toes with long pointed ends. All five toes are longer, thinner, and closer together than river otter toes.



Fox tracks on a sandy ground. The tracks about the same size as otter tracks, but foxes only have four toes and their nails on the track are much longer.



Beaver tracks on a muddy ground. The hind legs having webbing between the toes and can be 6-7" long. Though all feet have five toes, the prints often show five toes on the hind feet and four toes on the front feet.

Otter Landscaping

In addition to finding scat and tracks, other ways to spot river otter latrines involve looking for otter landscaping or signs of otters moving across the ground, which scientists refer to as trails, scrapes, or slides.

- 1) Otters live both on land and in the water – so scrapes and trails are created where they are coming in and out of the water.
- 2) Since otters are pretty big, they flattened reeds and grasses, making the scrape look like a path with dead grass, surrounded by green grass or reeds.
- 3) River otters may also move grass, leaves, plants, or soil completely out of the way, resulting in bare ground.
- 4) River otters may leave behind debris piles, including fish carcasses or other prey remains.

Below are images of areas where otters have come on land.



Here is a clear line of dead, flattened grass where otters are climbing in and out of the water.



Here is a clear line of flattened grass and disturbed dirt, leading to a piece of wood with river otter tracks.



Here all the leaves have been swept clean in a line leading up an embankment.

Acknowledgments

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