

# MOUNTAINS

## Northern river otters stage comeback



**Word from the Smokies**  
Frances Figart  
Columnist

Intriguing, humorous, and stealthy, river otters are seldom seen. But after being gone for 50 years, they have reclaimed their place as denizens of the Southern Appalachians.

“Otters make their homes in many watersheds in and around our mountain region and in Great Smoky Mountains National Park,” said Supervisory Wildlife Biologist Bill Stiver. “I have seen them swimming in the creek and climbing on the rocks on several occasions while I was working in the Hazel Creek drainage.”

Otters lived alongside humans in the United States for thousands of years before European settlers nearly drove them to extinction for economic gain in the fur trade within the span of a few hundred years. In the days before the park was formed, otter populations had already declined due to both this unregulated harvest and deterioration of their habitat. Up until 1986, the last recorded sighting of a Northern river otter in the Smokies had been 50 years earlier in 1936.

Fortunately, these charismatic little critters were reintroduced into the Smokies 36 years ago thanks to a National Park Service policy that allows for and encourages the reintroduction of native species when feasible.

“By the early 1980s, several state wildlife agencies were actively reintroducing river otters,” Stiver explained. “To learn what might be possible for the park, an analysis of potential river otter habitat was conducted by the Uplands Field Research lab at Twin Creeks Science and Education Center.”

In 1984, representatives from the Tennessee Valley Authority, Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency, The University of Tennessee, and Great Smoky Mountains National Park met to discuss reintroducing *Lontra canadensis* in the park. As a result, Feb. 27, 1986, saw the first reintroduction when 11 river otters were released into Abrams Creek. A similar project released 14 river otters into the Little River between 1988 and 1990. Finally, from 1992 to 1994, 112 more



**Northern river otters were reintroduced into Great Smoky Mountains National Park on Feb. 27, 1986, after a 50-year absence due to overhunting and habitat destruction.** PROVIDED BY ERIC KILBY

otters were released in watersheds throughout the park.

Upon release, some of these nimble creatures traveled up to 118 miles to find their new homes, a remarkable distance over rough terrain. One was even observed by a ranger along the Appalachian Trail.

Otters like secluded, wooded streams with abundant bank debris such as rocks and logs. These members of the weasel family have actually benefited from the resurgence of beavers in the Southeast because beaver ponds also provide ideal otter habitat.

“As skilled predators, river otters are integral to our aquatic ecosystems because they exert top-down control of prey populations,” said Erin Canter, manager of science literacy and research with park partner Great Smoky Mountains Institute at Tremont. “Since they have a low tolerance for polluted waters, their presence is an indication of a healthy ecosystem, and they are therefore one of many ‘indicator species’ we can find within the Great Smoky Mountains.”

Canter manages community science programs that engage community members in regional and national ecological monitoring projects, one of which is “Otter Spotter.” It encourages park visitors to upload sightings of ot-



**To see otters in the wild, be alert for their distinctive chirping sounds and keep an eye out for quick fluid movements in large low-elevation streams.**

PROVIDED BY JONATHAN EISEN

ters to the iNaturalist app so researchers and park managers can assess their distribution in the park since reintroduction.

According to “Mammals of the Smokies,” otters can dive to a depth of 60 feet and swim for distances of up to a quarter of a mile without coming up for air. They have an acute sense of smell and highly developed tactile senses. Their hearing is good, but they are nearsighted, an adaptation for underwater vision. “Reintroduced otters have had no sig-

nificant impact on trout populations within the park,” said Canter. “Their primary food source is crayfish, which is supplemented with native fish species such as hogfish and stonerollers as well as amphibians such as salamanders and frogs. They’ve even been spotted snacking on our largest salamander species: the Hellbender! While they are impressive fishers, they do not pose significant competition to human fishermen.”

Park Fisheries Biologist Matt Kulp adds that “our long-term monitoring data (some of which spans 20 to 30 years) indicates no changes in trout or non-gamfish abundance following the introduction of otters. These mammals are opportunistic, and would eat fish if readily available, but do not eat enough fish to impact the natural variation observed in populations associated with winter floods, summer droughts, and natural annual mortality.”

In addition to being integral to the Southern Appalachian ecosystem in which they evolved, these curious and playful mammals also bring joy to anyone who is lucky enough to watch them tumble and chase one another in the water or on the banks of our mountain streams and rivers. If you are up for the challenge, the most likely places to find them are the larger streams in the lower elevations — waterways like Little River, Abrams Creek, Middle Prong Little River, Hazel Creek, Deep Creek, and Little Pigeon River. Of course, there are many other places to see otters both East Tennessee and Western North Carolina.

Dawn and dusk are the best times to spy otters in our local rivers and creeks, though it is not unusual to catch a glimpse of them swimming even during the day. Be alert for their distinctive chirping sounds and keep an eye out for quick fluid movements in the water.

You can learn more about Otter Spotter at [gsm.it.org/community-science/otter-spotter](http://gsm.it.org/community-science/otter-spotter) and at [inaturalist.org/projects/otter-spotter-in-great-smoky-mountains-national-park](http://inaturalist.org/projects/otter-spotter-in-great-smoky-mountains-national-park).

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### STATE BRIEFS

#### Third person arrested in death of son of reality TV star

SMITHFIELD – A North Carolina sheriff’s office said Thursday that a third person has been arrested in connection with the shooting death of a man whose father was featured in a reality television show about his towing and repossession business.

According to news outlets, Johnston County Sheriff Steve Bizzell said Cassidy Lorene Hunter, 21, of Smithfield was arrested Thursday and charged with accessory after the fact in the Feb. 17 death of Harley Alexander Shirley, 21, and the shooting of a woman who remains hospitalized.

Hunter is jailed on a \$1 million bond. It wasn’t known whether she has an attorney.

The Johnston County Sheriff’s Office said shots were fired during a memorial service for a person killed in a traffic accident earlier this month. In a Facebook post, Ronnie Shirley confirmed that his son was fatally shot in Garner late Thursday.

The elder Shirley and his wife, Amy Shirley, own Lizard Lick Towing and starred in a truTV reality show based on their family business from 2011 to 2014.

The Sheriff’s Office said Wednesday that a 16-year-old and a 17-year-old were charged with murder and attempted murder.

#### Police: Man tried to rob store with lighter, spray de-icer

LENOIR – Police in North Carolina have arrested a man who they say attempted to rob a convenience store using a lighter and a can of spray de-icer.

Lenoir police said in a news release that a man entered a store around 12:45 p.m. on Wednesday and handed the cashier a note demanding money, the Hickory Daily Record reported.

The cashier refused and the man sprayed the de-icer and ignited it with the cigarette lighter, causing a small fire near the cash register that was quickly extinguished, the news release said. No injuries were reported.

Logan Ryan Jones, 29, of Lenoir, was

arrested at his home by Caldwell County sheriff’s deputies, the news release said. Jones, who had an outstanding warrant for accessory before the fact to a felony, also was charged with attempted robbery with a dangerous weapon and burning certain buildings. His bond was set at \$250,000, and his attorney wasn’t immediately available for comment on Thursday.

#### Feds: N. Carolina police officer sold cocaine while on duty

RALEIGH – A North Carolina police officer is accused by federal prosecutors of selling cocaine while he was in uniform, the U.S. Department of Justice said Thursday.

Raleigh police officer Keven Rodriguez was taken into custody by agents with the Drug Enforcement Administration on Wednesday after a judge issued a warrant for his arrest, U.S. Attorney Michael Easley said at a news conference.

—The Associated Press

### Police: Sneaker sale turns into robbery

**Sarah Honosky**

Asheville Citizen Times  
USA TODAY NETWORK

ASHEVILLE – After allegedly robbing two people at gunpoint during the sale of a pair of tennis shoes, an Asheville teen was arrested Feb. 23 for committing armed robbery at a residence in southeast Asheville, according to an APD news release.

Marqua Hines, 18, has been charged with two counts of robbery with a dangerous weapon, two counts of communicating threats and larceny of a firearm.

The release said Hines and another suspect robbed two victims of a pistol, wallets, keys, cash and shoes during what was supposed to be the sale of a pair of sneakers the night of Feb. 22.

Hines is being held in the Buncombe County Detention Center on a \$200,000 bond.

Police say a second suspect is being investigated.

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