

**Foothold traps** – Foothold traps are less susceptible to catching otters, provided they are set in deep water. Foothold traps set in shallow water have a high potential for capturing otters, especially those set at water's edge where beaver have trails entering and exiting the water. The main advantage to using foothold traps in shared habitats is the ability to make sets away from the travel way and using lure to attract beaver to a set. Targeting foothold traps to restrain the beaver by the hind leg will place the trap in deeper water and far enough away from the bank to avoid otters (Figure 8). This is done by placing the trap 16-20 inches from the bank in 10-16 inches of water, and slightly off to the right or left of center. Using 6 pounds of trap pan tension will also reduce the potential for catching an otter, yet remain effective for beaver.

**Cable devices** – Of all the tools available to North Dakota trappers, the cable device, when properly set for beaver, is the least likely to capture an otter. For catching beaver, a loop diameter of 9-12 inches is used. With this size loop, most otters will pass through.

**Alternative beaver sets** – Blind sets in beaver travel ways have a high potential for incidentally catching an otter. Moving these sets out of the main travel way will help avoid incidental catches. A beaver is highly susceptible to lure and visual attractors, whereas otters are rarely attracted to beaver sign or odors. Making a castor mound set near a travel way allows you to capture beaver while avoiding otters. Baited sets for beaver that use peeled sticks and beaver food lures hold almost no attraction for otters.

**If You Catch an Otter**

While all North Dakota trappers should make an effort to reduce the potential, it is still possible for an otter capture to occur. If an otter is caught incidentally and is still alive, release it without causing injury to yourself or the otter. Seek assistance if this is not possible.

If the otter is dead, leave it in the trap and contact your local game warden. The warden will give you specific instructions on what you should do. While an incidental catch is not a violation of law, your conduct following that capture can be. It is required that incidental otter catches are turned into the North Dakota Game and Fish Department.

Incidental catches are used in our education program and provide valuable training opportunities. Carcasses provide reproductive, age and health data that are important to management programs, and the pelt can be used in the North Dakota Cooperative Fur Harvester Education Program. Otters are a valued natural resource that requires responsible management. You are a part of that responsible management, and your actions today have a significant impact on the future.

*This brochure is the product of the North Dakota Cooperative Fur Harvester Education Program (CFHEP)*



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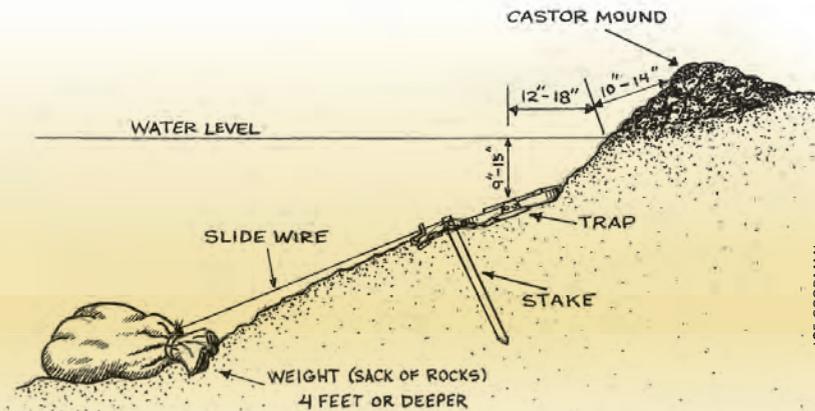
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**Figure 8.** Foothold traps set in 10-16 inches of water, so as to catch the hind foot of a beaver, are less likely to catch an otter.



JOE GOODMAN



DIANE HARGREAVES

# RIVER OTTERS

IN NORTH DAKOTA

Trapping  
Avoidance  
Techniques



DIANE HARGREAVES

River otter sightings and incidental catches are increasing in North Dakota. Since otter and beaver use the same habitat, there is potential for trappers in North Dakota to encounter otters while trapping beavers. Although there is no guarantee that a trapper will not catch an otter, the methods discussed can reduce this risk, with minimal impact on beaver trapping success.

**Figure 1.** Similar to mink but larger, otter tracks are 2-3 inches wide and slightly shorter in length than they are wide.



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**Figure 2.** Otters often slide on their stomachs while traveling in snow, leaving distinctive “slip” markings.



JACQUIE ERMER

### Are Otters Present?

The first step to avoid trapping an otter is to learn to recognize when otters are present on your trap line. Otter tracks resemble those of a mink, but are larger, measuring 2-3 inches wide (Figure 1). Otters lope as they travel, so individual tracks will be side-by-side in pairs. The distance between pairs may measure 18 to 30 inches, depending on the size of the animal and the speed at which it was traveling. In winter, look for flattened trails in the snow, known as “slips,” where an otter has slid on its stomach down a bank or between lopes (Figure 2). Otter latrine sites or “sprints” are also distinctive and are typically found on high points along the banks of streams, rivers, lakes or ditches (Figure 3). The vegetation is usually flattened and the area may contain flat, runny piles of otter vomit, typically greenish in color and containing undigested fish scales, bones or crayfish parts. Otter scat consists of distinct clumps of mostly digested material, is black and may be flattened from the animal walking on it (Figure 4). Weather conditions can quickly deteriorate both vomit and scat.



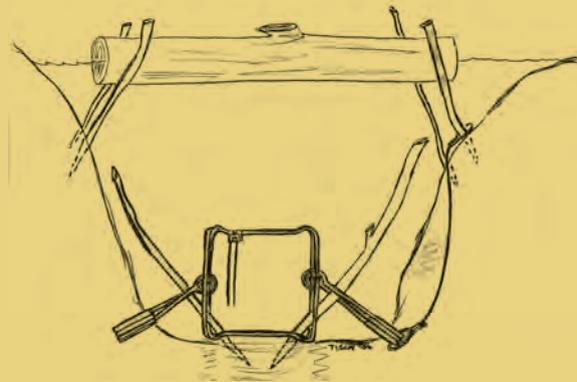
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**Figure 3.** Otter latrines or “sprints” are used for marking territories and consist of an area where otters routinely deposit feces and vomit.

**Figure 4.** Otter scat often includes undigested fish scales, bones and crayfish shells.

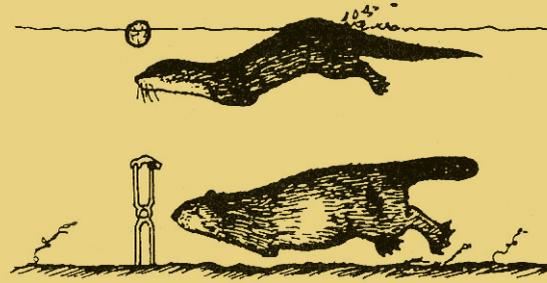


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RICK TISCHAEFER

**Figure 5.** A body-gripping trap set on the bottom with a dive pole floating above, has a good chance to catch a beaver, while avoiding an otter.



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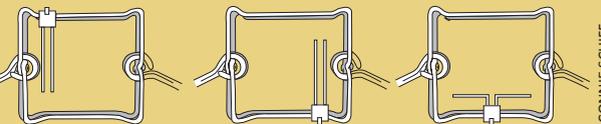
**Figure 6.** A beaver will dive to the bottom to avoid a floating object, but an otter typically just dives right under the floating object.

Otters also make “wallows” or “scratch ups.” These are found along streams, ditches or river edges and consist of an area 3-6 feet in diameter where the grass or vegetation has been raked or scratched to the center of the circle. Otters use these as identity markers and males will use them to define territory. Often scat or vomit can be found nearby.

### Where Can Otters Be Found?

Otters can be found almost anywhere an aquatic food source exists. They usually follow streams and other small watercourses, but they will also travel across dry land.

Otters often travel between watersheds while looking for food. Any small ditch, creek or stream that connects to another water body can be an otter travel way. This is especially true of a small drainage that leads to or from a marsh, swamp or pond where otters prefer to hunt.



CONNIE SCHIFF

**Figure 7.** By placing trigger wires off to one side and straight up or down in a submerged set, a body-gripping trap will still catch a beaver while often avoiding an otter. Additionally, a bottom, center trigger with the wires bent out at a 90 degree angle has also been shown to be effective for catching beavers, while avoiding otters.

The entrance and exits to beaver ponds and beaver dam crossovers are also common otter travel ways. While these places may be good for catching beaver, they also have a high potential for catching an otter. Beavers and otters will also use crossovers at culverts and other man-made devices.

Otters will frequent abandoned beaver lodges and bank dens. They check these regularly and often use them for temporary shelter. Abandoned dens and lodges are not particularly good beaver trapping locations and should be avoided anyway.

### Trapping Techniques For Avoiding Otters

**Body-gripping traps** – The 10-by-10 inch (e.g. #330) body-gripping traps commonly used for trapping beaver have the highest potential for capturing an otter. Field studies and research have shown that certain trap placements and trigger configurations can effectively reduce the potential for capturing an otter, yet remain effective for beaver. Placing the body-gripping trap deep underwater can reduce the potential for capturing an otter. Choose locations that are at least 2-3 feet deep (or more). Stake your trap on the bottom and float a dive pole over it (Figure 5). Generally, when beavers encounter the pole, they will dive to the bottom to avoid it. A properly placed trap will catch a beaver, while an approaching otter will just duck under the pole and pass over the trap (Figure 6). With submerged sets, move trigger wires to one side, and keep the wires pointing straight down or up (Figure 7). Or, keep the trigger in the middle and bend the wires out at a 90 degree angle. This may allow an otter to pass through, while still effectively catching a beaver moving through the trap.