



Organization for the Assabet River

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Otters and Fishers and Minks - Oh My!

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In the last newsletter we peeked into the lives of beavers and muskrats, two of the river-dwelling mammals that inhabit our Assabet River. The beaver and muskrat “share” the river with two more elusive mammals: minks and river otters. The muskrat, being the primary late-night snack for the mink, doesn’t likely view this much as a sharing proposition.

Minks (*Mustela vison*) are members of the weasel family (cousins of the skunk and otter), about 18-24 inches long with long furry tails (female minks are smaller than their male counterparts) and weigh about three pounds. Their fur is thick and dark brown with a lighter patch under the chin or belly. Webbing on their feet makes them very effective swimmers.

If you think you see a mink, but it’s way too large, you are likely looking at a fisher. Fishers are also members of the weasel family but are two-three feet long and large males can weigh over 12 pounds. You would think that with a name like fisher they would be one of our river-dwelling animals, but fishers don’t hang around the water that much and tend to prefer forest areas with denser cover.

While they may look quite cute and cuddly, minks are very skilled hunters. They are strictly carnivores whose diet varies with the available prey. Muskrats, along

with voles, rabbits, and other rodents, are very popular mink meals. Equally desirable are fish, crayfish, frogs, and clams.

Because he is a hunter, the range of a mink is rather large. A single mink might patrol up to a mile’s worth of riverfront. Minks make their dens in hollow logs or in burrows along stream edges. They’ve even been known to use abandoned muskrat burrows or beaver lodges.

Mating season for minks runs from February through April. Litters of three to six kits are born in April or May. Within seven weeks they are nearly half their adult size. The young minks must fend for themselves by autumn.

Minks are generally tolerant of human activity. Indeed, I’ve seen more mink in the Concord stretch of the Assabet than in any other section. Spotting a mink is pretty rare, but you can often find signs of mink along river and stream beds. You have to keep a sharp eye out for minks as they can move very quickly when hunting or following a scent. Minks will scamper over rugged riverside terrain and will dive into snow banks trying to catch a mouse hiding in the layer between the grass and the snow.

Like the mink, the river otter is also a member of the weasel family - and is the largest in that family. Otters are three to

four feet long and weigh about 30 pounds. They share with the mink the trait of sexual dimorphism: female river otters are nearly 20% smaller than the males.

More at home in the water than the mink, the river otter’s diet consists largely of fish, crayfish and amphibians, but it will also take birds or the occasional muskrat. The otter prefers “slow moving” fish such as suckers, carp, shiners, sunfish, and perch. Game fish, such as trout, are not normally on the otter’s menu.

A river otter requires about three square miles of territory to feed its appetite. This requires a fairly healthy ecosystem and the presence of otters is often considered a good sign of water quality.

River otters are not common on the Assabet River, but they are not unknown. There have been sightings in both Stow and Acton - usually during the winter months. Assabet Keeping Track (AKT) has found otter slides and tracks around the Assabet River National Wildlife Refuge, evidence they are in the area. Trackers also use otter scat as a way to identify where otters have set up shop. Otter scat is distinguished by its shiny fish scales, which are not digested by the otter.

While otters are accomplished hunters they are also well known for their playfulness. Finding an otter or otter family in the winter can be especially entertaining as they are known to find a short hillside and slide down the snow. Sliding isn’t just for playtime, it is an efficient traveling method when they need to cover longer stretches of snow-covered terrain.

When we look at just these four small furry animals that dwell along the Assabet River it is striking to see how tightly their survival is interwoven with the ecology of the riverbank. The term “riparian area” refers to this boundary between land and



Left: mink in the Assabet River NWR. Right: fisher in the Oxbow NWR.

Photos by Ron McAadow (courtesy of the Wildlife Trails Education Project, www.wtepg.org)

over

the water. As you can see, this riparian land provides a corridor for travel, vegetation for food, hollows for shelter, and access to the river itself.

Protecting this riparian zone is as important as protecting the quality of the water in the river - the two are tightly intertwined. Human development can very easily impact the ecology of the riverfront. Roadways and bridges are obstacles to travel that can often take the life of animals trying to cross them. Manicured lawns that extend to the river edge remove a diversity of vegetation that act as both food source and shelter. Intrusions by pets can increase the stress on riverside-dwelling animals making otherwise good habitat unsuitable for caring for their families. Ideally, the riparian corridor should be at least 100 yards on each side of the river and should retain features like dead or dying standing trees, hollow logs, sandy banks, bank-side burrows, and a wide variety of trees and bushes.



River otter. Photo by Dan Stimson, Sudbury Valley Trustees.

The more we, as individuals and communities, protect this corridor, the greater the chance that the muskrat, beaver, minks, otters and many other animals large and small will make their home along the banks of the Assabet -- and we'll hear a resounding slap of approval from the riverside residents. ❖



Otter slide and tracks. Photo by Tom Wilson, River Meadow Brook Association.