

For Creative Minds

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Basic Needs and Living and Nonliving Things

Like all living things, North American river otters have basic needs that must be met where they live. Basic needs include oxygen to breathe, water, food, and shelter from predators and the environment.

In all habitats and ecosystems, living things rely on both living things and nonliving things to survive. Can you identify which things found in a river otter's habitat are living and which are nonliving?

River otters live around **freshwater** rivers, streams and lakes, called the "riparian zone." Some even live around brackish (a mixture of salt and freshwater) salt marsh areas or coastlines. They cannot live in pure saltwater like the ocean but can "visit" pure saltwater areas. They move around well on land and in the water.

While these otters sometimes make their homes in abandoned beaver lodges or hollow trees, they usually dig a **den** in the soft **dirt** along a river bank and line it with grass, leaves, and fur. They build lots of tunnels to get in and out of their dens.

North American river otters mostly eat other **animals** but will also eat some **plants**. They eat almost any other small animals they find living near them including fish, crayfish, crabs, snails, turtles, frogs, insects, small rodents, birds, rabbits, ducks, and even snakes.

Like all mammals, river otters breathe **oxygen from the air**. If they are in the water, they come to the surface to breathe. If the water is frozen into ice during the winter, they make holes so they can come up to breathe. They can hold their breath for up to four minutes and can dive down 36 feet (11 meters).



Answers: Basic Needs: Oxygen: air, water: fresh or brackish, food: most small animals found in their habitat and some plants but not trash, shelter: dens

Living things: animals and plants they eat, they line their dens with grass, leaves, and fur.

Nonliving things: freshwater, dirt, oxygen in air

North American River Otter or Sea Otter?

Many people get confused between North American river otters and sea otters.

Use the information in the chart to identify which images are North American river otters or sea otters.



North American River Otter	Sea Otter
favorite foods: fish, crabs, frogs, crayfish, snails, rodents, birds	favorite foods: sea urchins, crabs, clams, shrimp, fish
usually eats on land	eats while floating on its back
swims with webbed feet	swims with hind feet and tail
swims belly down	floats on its back
gives birth on land	gives birth in the water
multiple pups born at a time	one single pup born at a time
lives in fresh or brackish water, will travel into salt water	lives in salt water
often comes on land and can move easily	rarely comes on land and is clumsy
rests in dens on land	rests in water, may wrap itself in kelp
main predators are alligators, bobcats, coyotes, wolves	main predators are orcas and sharks
lives all over the US and Canada	lives off the coasts in the North Pacific Ocean from California to Alaska and the east coast of Russia
one of 12 different river otter species found all over the world	only otter species that lives primarily in ocean (salt) water
member of the mustelid, or weasel, family	member of the mustelid, or weasel, family

Answers: A-river otter; B-sea otter; C-river otter

North American River Otter Adaptations

All animals have adaptations to help them live and survive in their habitat.

Some adaptations are parts of their bodies (physical).

Other adaptations are the way they do things (behavioral).

Can you figure out which of these adaptations are physical or behavioral?

River otters have **claws** on their feet. These help otters grip in slippery mud or in snow or ice. Their claws also help them dig the tunnels that make their dens.

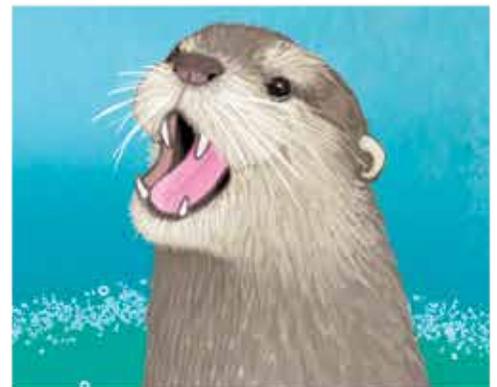
Otters' **webbed** feet help push them through the water, making them fast swimmers.



A river otter's **thick fur** keeps it warm. When swimming, a river otter's skin stays completely dry. That's because its fur catches air in it, keeping the water away from its skin. When a river otter swims, air bubbles escape from its fur, leaving a trail behind it.

River otters sometimes make a snorting **sound** to alert others to danger.

A frightened river otter can let out a scream that is so loud it carries a mile and a half over water.



Physical: claws & webbed feet; thick fur. Behavioral: making sounds

A river otter's **tail** is almost half of its total length. It's thick and muscular, and by swishing it, the otter pushes forward in the water.

River otters' flexible **spines** allow them to turn quickly and move with great speed in the water. They are so flexible that they sometimes swim in tight circles, creating whirlpools that bring their food to the surface for them.



River Otters' thick **whiskers** help them feel around underwater.

River otters have a third, clear, **eyelid** called a nictitating membrane. It protects the otter's eye and allows it to see while swimming.

Not only that, their **eyes** can change shape underwater to help them focus.



River otters' **ears** and **nostrils** close tight to keep water out while they swim.

Physical: all of the above