

# WILDLIFE OF VICTORIA PARK

by John Serrao

## RIVER OTTER

The first wild mammal that greeted me after I moved to Florida 9 years ago was the River Otter. One took up residence in the pond in my backyard during my first winter in Victoria Gardens, and returned again the following winter. Over the years I've enjoyed seeing River Otters in this pond several more times, as well as in many other rivers, streams, lakes, ponds, swamps, and marshes throughout Florida. Like the bobcat, it's an exciting, charismatic mammal that I rarely saw when I lived in the northeastern states (even though otters occur all the way up into Alaska), but has now become a much more common encounter.

The long, slender body of the River Otter is up to 3 1/2 feet long and 30 pounds, and is

streamlined for a semi-aquatic existence. With dense, thick, oiled fur, a long, muscular tail, short legs, and webbed toes, the otter's body is built for swimming. The small ears and nose can close underwater, and the otter can remain submerged for up to 4 minutes. Its long, sensitive whiskers help it locate prey underwater. Otters hunt for fish, frogs, crayfish, and turtles to fuel their high rate of metabolism — like most members of the mustelid (weasel) family, otters have to consume lots of calories to support their active lifestyles.

Several of my otter sightings have been family groups — a mother with 2 or 3 juveniles swimming together in a pond or canal, or crossing a woodland road. In the water, they often allow close observations as they swim, dive, or cavort playfully, and I've even enjoyed seeing otters roll around in the dirt along the banks of the pond in my backyard. The River Otter is certainly an animal you can never get tired of watching.