



# SEATUCK

CONSERVING LONG ISLAND WILDLIFE

## LONG ISLAND RIVER OTTER PROJECT 2023 UPDATE

Mike Bottini  
Wildlife Biologist  
Seatuck Environmental Association  
[mbottini@seatuck.org](mailto:mbottini@seatuck.org)

### I. SURVEYS / DISTRIBUTION MAPPING

Several new otter latrine sites representing new otter home ranges and increases in otter distribution were documented during the 2023 winter and spring survey season.

- a) **PECONIC RIVER WATERSHED:** New sites were mapped in the river's headwaters at the TNC's Calverton Ponds Preserve. The latrine site on the Little River's Woodhull dam shifted east just beyond the fish passage and revegetation work recently completed there. No latrine sites have yet been documented at its headwater pond: Wildwood Lake. The latrines at the unnamed ponds north of Rte 58 and on both sides of Osborn Ave. have been abandoned since the 2018 otter roadkill on Rte. 58. Several new latrines were mapped on the small tributary south of Rte. 24 and west of Rte. 105.
- b) **SAWMILL CREEK:** new latrines were mapped at this creek's headwaters north of Rte. 25 as well as at its tidal section just south of Rte. 105.
- c) **NORTH FORK:** New sites were documented at Peconic Land Trusts' Wolf Pond Preserve (Hog Neck) and Ruth Oliva Preserve (Dam Pond), the Downs Farm Preserve and the headwaters of Greenport's Stirling Basin.
- d) **SHELTER ISLAND:** New sites were documented and mapped in Gardiners Creek at Sylvester Manor and the headwaters of Chase Creek.
- e) **SOUTH FORK:** Two new sites were mapped, both in North Haven and the first documented otter latrines for that village. Despite significant survey effort and excellent otter habitat, no evidence of established otter home ranges could be found east of East Hampton's Northwest area or in Southampton between the canal and Sag Harbor. The only otter home ranges here are limited to the northern end of the Long Pond Greenbelt, Northwest Creek and the Alewife Brook watershed (see BEHAVIOR NOTE below).
- f) **SOUTH SHORE ESTUARY RESERVE:** Two new sites, the Carmans River and the Motts Brook watersheds, join the Connetquot and Little Seatuck Creek watersheds as the four watersheds where otters have established a foothold on Long Island's south shore.

*\*\*\* Many thanks to otter survey volunteers including Stonybrook University students **Brooke Osekoski, Ana Penavic, Anna Meichenbaum, and Jess Esposito**; wildlife photographer **KC Bailey; Luke Ormand** (Town of Brookhaven) for his field time monitoring and surveying otter activity on the south shore and Wertheim USFWS staff **Terra Willi and Brooke Shellman** for helping to document otters at Wertheim Wildlife Refuge this spring.*

## **II. ROADKILLS & ROADKILL MITIGATION MEASURES**

Since the Long Island River Project commenced in 2008, there have been 23 documented otter roadkills. 26% involve dams that force otters out of the water and across roads built on or near the dams. These are easily mitigated with a simple and inexpensive ramp or staircase. Seatuck staff have constructed otter staircases at three known roadkill sites and have trail cam evidence that otters are using them.

The remaining roadkill sites would require installing culverts under roads; a more complicated and potentially expensive mitigation measure. **Kevin Walsh** has excellent documentation of several wildlife species, including a female otter and two pups, utilizing a culvert to pass under a road. Here's the link to his amazing video:

<https://www.facebook.com/100021951630215/videos/788153338917422/>

Otter volunteer **Peter Janow** managed to pinpoint the route otters were using to cross Waterside Road, Fort Salonga (the site of an otter roadkill) and worked with Huntington Town officials to get "wildlife crossing" signage installed there. Peter has images of an adult female and two pups crossing there this spring.

Seatuck staff met with NYSDEC Regional Director Cathy Haas in December 2022 to discuss the issue of otter-motor vehicle collisions on Long Island and offered to partner with the state agency to mitigate this major source of otter mortality. To our surprise, there was no interest in the idea. We've since received a grant from the **Marilyn Lichtman Foundation** to identify potential otter roadkill sites on the south shore and develop, install and monitor mitigation measures at two sites.

## **III. LONG ISLAND MAMMAL SURVEY**

Please consider getting involved in this three-year project to map the current distribution of terrestrial and semi-aquatic mammals on Long Island. The goal is to update the last mammal survey on L.I. which took place in the early 1960s.

For more info visit: <https://seatuck.org/long-island-mammal-survey/>

## **IV. BEHAVIOR NOTES**

**May Bartens** sent a mid-February video of an otter in a suburban backyard one mile south of a known otter home range in the Wading River / Shoreham watershed, 0.8 mile north of Lake Panamoka and 1.2 mile west of the Schiff Scout Reservation at Deep Pond. The latter two water bodies were surveyed in 2021 but no signs of otters were noted. This was most likely a juvenile dispersing from its mother's home range as she prepares to give birth to another litter in late February – early March. However, it's not unusual to find adult otters a mile or more from water when traveling overland between watersheds in their large home ranges.

**Pauline and Rob Rosen** were quick enough to video an otter dashing across the beach on Block Island Sound in Montauk, heading toward Big Reed Pond, in early April 2023. Later that spring I surveyed Montauk's Oyster Pond, Big Reed Pond, Stepping Stones Pond and Fresh Pond by kayak, and Little Reed by foot. Despite excellent otter habitat in all five waterways, I found no otter scent stations. This individual was most likely a dispersing juvenile born in March

2022 (the young stay with mom for most of their first year: 10-12 months). Based on many other sightings here on Long Island, it appears that this highly social animal will not settle and establish a home range in watersheds that lack other otter neighbors.

**Mike Zunno, Jill Christina** and a number of folks pointed out an unusual event at Fuchs Pond (part of the Crab Meadow, Fort Salonga watershed) in March, 2023. An otter was regularly observed hunting in the very small freshwater pond in the middle of the day, eventually attracting a large crowd that didn't seem to phase the hungry otter. Among the midday meals were eel (left: photo by Mike Zunno) and crayfish (right photo by Jill Christina) both otter favorites (photos below).



This unusual situation of an otter feeding in a tiny pond in close proximity to a large crowd of onlookers during daylight hours went on for quite a few days. Peter Janow has documented otter pups in this area in two different years. It's possible this was a mature female who had just given birth to pups and was unable to leave the natal den at night to feed due to the low nighttime temperatures that required her body heat to keep the pups warm (nighttime low temps for the first two weeks in March averaged 31°F). If so, her daily feeding routine may have had to take place during the warmest time of day. This idea generated interest in distinguishing male from female otters.

This is not as easy as one would think. Among the river otter's adaptations for efficient swimming are its streamlined body shape. Below are roadkill photos of the undersides of a mature male and a mature female. Genitalia are not visually apparent except for males whose swollen testicles show during the mating season (February-March). The swollen teats of a lactating female can be seen in some photos from March through June. But generally, sexing river otters requires locating the genital openings or palpating for the presence of a baculum (males).





Above: A male roadkill (top) and female (bottom) with no evidence of genitalia visible.

Below: The male's baculum is located between the anal opening and genital opening, the latter being several inches forward of the anus (left photo). The female's genital opening is located forward of but very close to the anus (right photo). [mike bottini photos]

