

The Patron Saints of Play

by Brett Amy Thelen, Science Director

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Otters play on the ice at Nubanusit Brook in Peterborough. photo © Tom Momeyer

Earlier this winter, I stopped by a local pond while on a break between meetings. I had intended to get out for a walk much earlier in the day, but instead found myself glued to the computer, buried under a mountain of emails, spreadsheets, and Zooms. Before I knew it, it was late afternoon, and I only had time for a quick jaunt. It was the tail end of [Weird Duck Season](#), so I grabbed my binoculars, just in case, and set out for a short stroll.

I didn't get very far.

Almost immediately, I saw movement in the water, and discovered something even more thrilling than a weird duck. An otter! Then a second, and a third. All in all, there were five. The collective noun for a group of otters is a “romp,” and that’s exactly what they were doing: splashing, chattering, chirping, chuffing, feasting, and punching through the skim of ice that was creeping across the pond.

The air was still and I was alone on the dirt road bordering the pond – no passing cars or dog walkers – so I could hear every snuffle and lip smack, every crack of the plate-thin ice.

A few weeks later, grumpy after an extended stretch of time with a broken hot water heater, my husband and I stumbled upon a trio of otters on a different pond, even closer to home. They were traveling back and forth underwater between two holes in the ice, occasionally emerging with something delectable in their maws. Unlike the humans peering at them through binoculars, they were utterly unconcerned about bathing in ice-cold water. In fact, they seemed to relish it. (Otter fur contains approximately 156,000 hairs per square inch, making it both incredibly warm and highly water-resistant. Humans, on the other hand, average a measly 800 to 1,290 hairs per square inch, and therefore require a hot shower every now and then.)

In both instances, my encounters with the otters did what wildlife always do, which is to say that they snapped me, instantly, into the present moment. The world of work and household hardships fell away, and it was just me and the otters, in their world.

Otters are curious, social, and – most of all – playful, so it's not lost on me that they showed up when I was mired in stress. But I'm not the only one who's been noticing otters this winter: my Harris Center colleagues have seen them at six or eight different local waterbodies since November, and when I wrote my friends Eric and Adine to tell them how dazzled I was by the bevy of otters I'd seen just down the road from their house, they responded that they'd been enjoying the otter show at that particular pond for weeks.

Finding Otters

One silver lining of warmer winters is that partially frozen ponds can make for good otter-watching, especially at spots where open water meets ice. (These are also good places to scan for mink, muskrats, beavers, and even bald eagles.)

Despite their puppylike faces, otters are not canine, and though they sometimes share space with beavers, they're not rodents either. Otters are mustelids, a family of lanky carnivores that also includes mink, fishers, and weasels. Like weasels, otters seem to be in constant motion and rarely stay in the same spot for more than a few minutes, so if you don't see one at first glance, give it some time and keep scanning the ice for movement.

While finding otters requires a touch of serendipity, finding what they've left behind does not, especially in winter. Although they primarily feed on aquatic animals, they spend up to 75 percent of their time on land, and their scat and tracks can be found in winter snow if you know where to look.

A basic tenet of otter philosophy seems to be: why walk when you can slide on your belly instead? Look for their slides – smooth troughs in the snow, 8 to 12 inches in width and up to 25 feet long,

with pawprints on either end – on dams, beaver lodges, and other slopes near water.

Otter latrines – also known as scent stations, haul outs, rolls, or, if you must, “brown-outs” – are also a common otter sign, usually within 15 feet of the water on points of land, small islands, beaver dams and lodges, and narrow areas between two waterbodies. Latrines are characterized by scraped ground, scat, urine, and sometimes a jellylike material with olfactory hues thought to play a role in communication with other otters. These sites are especially active in the winter months, perhaps as a prelude to courtship.

Unlike the twisty, tubular scat of their smaller cousins, otter scat typically takes the form of scattered piles of fish scales and crayfish shells. If it’s fresh, it will smell fishy, but the crustacean bits underscore an important point about otter fine dining. When I told him I was writing this column, Harris Center Naturalist Emeritus Meade Cadot – ever a stalwart defender of underappreciated wildlife – asked me to share that, though otters are often villainized as voracious competitors of recreational trout fishing and do occasionally eat small trout, they are actually beneficial to trout populations because they also consume great quantities of crayfish and brown bullheads (“hornpout”), both of which eat trout eggs and young.

In his 1971 classic, “The World of the Otter” – which was loaned to me, festooned with post-it notes, by Meade – author Ed Park describes the otter as “the fun-lovingest of all” the animals, and “a dedicated good-time Charlie.”

I will never love winter as much as the otters do, but I do know how to heed their message, and I’m hoping you do too: turn off the computer, take a break from your chores, go outside, and play. 🐾



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