



# CRITTER CONNECTIONS





# Bald Cypress



Bald Cypress (*Taxodium distichum*) is a species of tree that is commonly found along riverbanks and swamps in East Texas and coastal states in the Southeastern United States. Bald Cypress is a type of conifer, like a pine tree, which means it produces seeds in cones instead of fruit in the case of flowering plants. The leaves of conifers are also different than flowering plants and have a flattened long and narrow shape. They are called Bald Cypress because they drop their leaves much earlier in the season than other trees. Most conifers are evergreen which means they have leaves year-round.

In swamps, the trees will grow out of the water and can be recognized by their "knees." These characteristic "knees" aren't like your knees, they look like cone-shaped woody knobs that come out of the ground all around the trunk. The knees are actually

growths from the tree's roots that are thought to help the tree get oxygen since most of the roots are underwater, but this function has not been confirmed. Other scientists think the knees are used to help anchor or hold the tree in place due to its proximity to water.



Bald Cypress are important to wildlife including otters. Their underground root system provides shelter for animals and also is a place where algae can grow. This algae attracts small fish, which in turn attracts other wildlife such as otters which feed on fish. Their seeds are eaten by many species of bird and even squirrels. They are also very important as flood and erosion control in aquatic ecosystems.

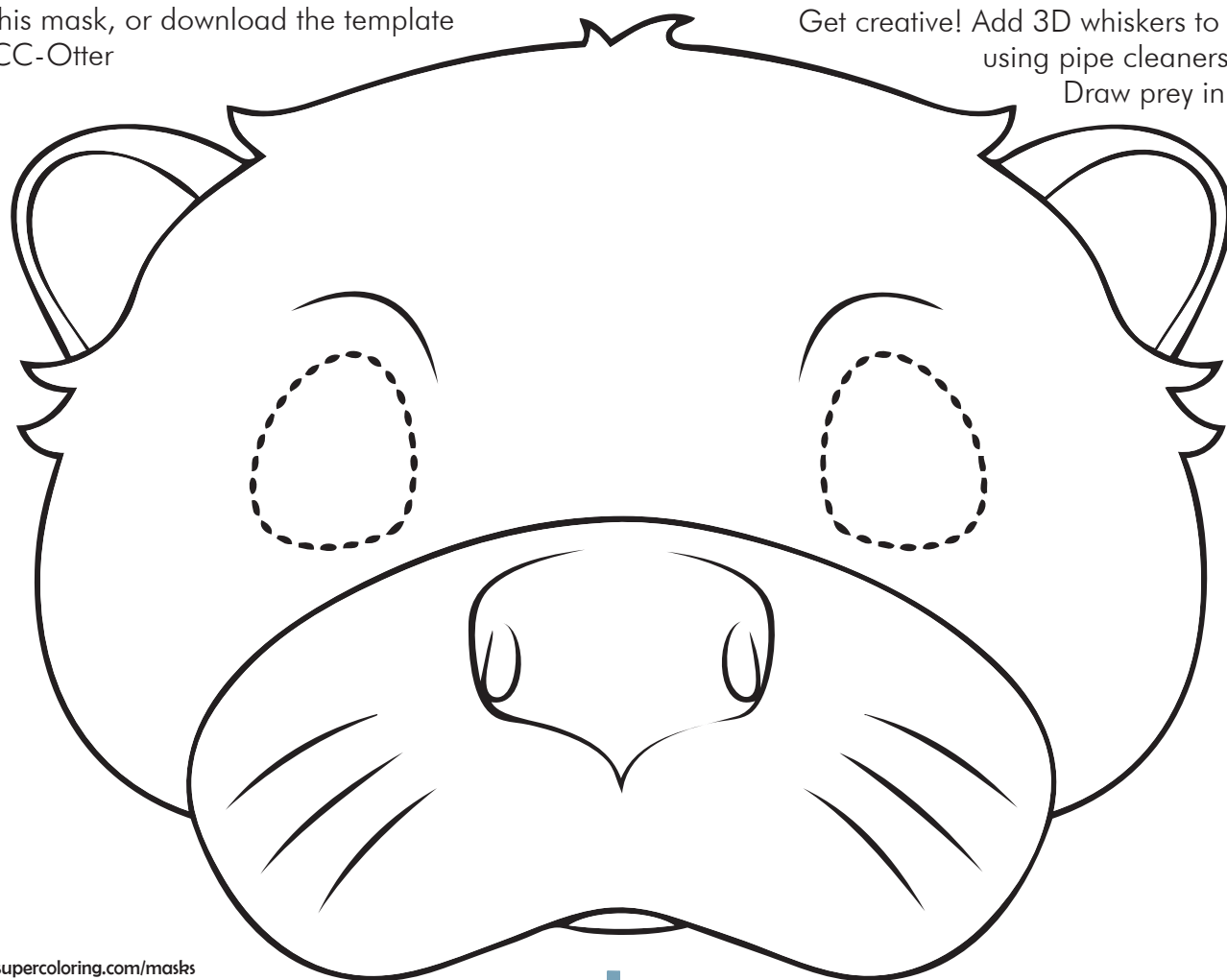


Source: Texas Parks & Wildlife Dept. Photos: Thomas & Dianne Jones, USFWS, Ladybird Johnson Wildflower Ctr

## Otter Mask

Cut out this mask, or download the template at [bit.ly/CC-Otter](http://bit.ly/CC-Otter)

Get creative! Add 3D whiskers to your mask using pipe cleaners or straws. Draw prey in its mouth.



# Did you know...



- ... that river otters do not float on their backs like sea otters?
- ... that otters are members of the weasel family?
- ... that otters can close their ears and nostrils when diving?
- ... that otters can hold their breath for almost eight minutes?
- ... that otters have webbed feet to help them swim?
- ... that otters are social and friendly animals?
- ... that otters have waterproof fur?
- ... that otters have whiskers that allow them to hunt underwater?
- ... that otters are very playful and will slide into the water from the bank?



Photo source: Dmitry Azovtsev

## Color Me

### North American River Otter

*(Lontra canadensis)*

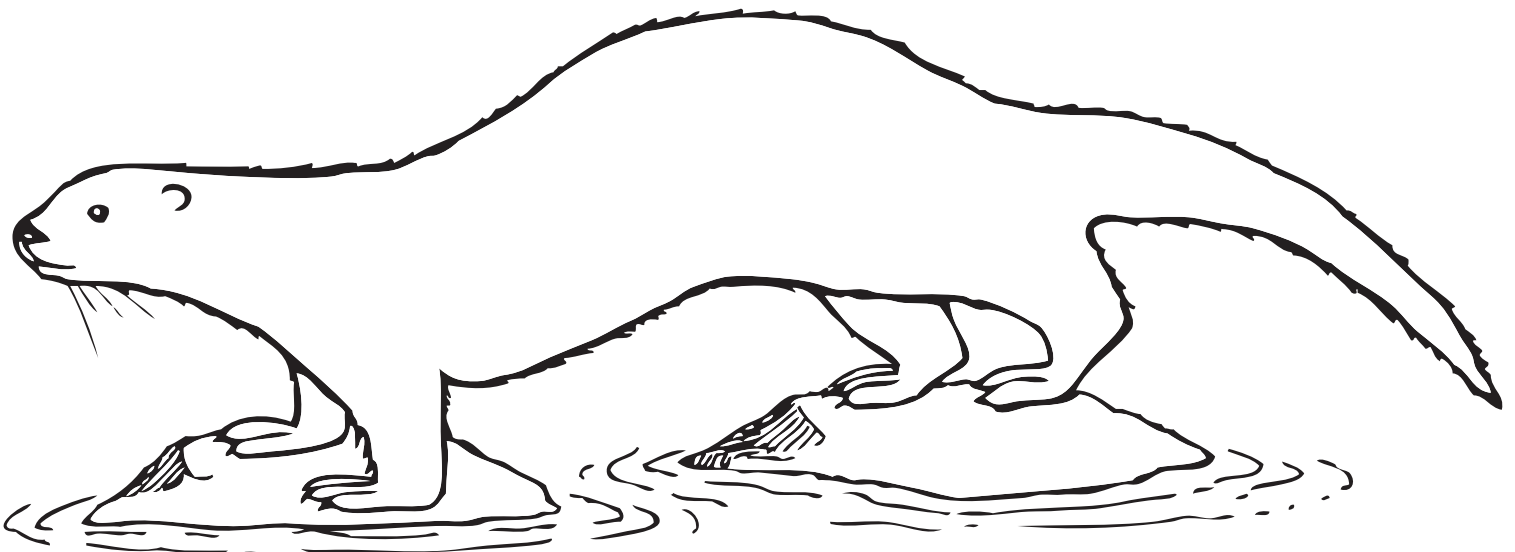


Image © Sheri Amsel, [www.exploringnature.org](http://www.exploringnature.org)

Photo: USFWS





## North American River Otter

by Elanor Dean

Texas is home to one species of otter called the North American River Otter. They are found in Eastern Texas and much of the Eastern United States and throughout Canada. Otters are mammals related to and in the same scientific family as badgers, ferrets and weasels.

Otters are found in semi-aquatic habitats that provide food and shelter like rivers, marshes and lakes. Typically they use dens near the water's edge. Fallen logs, tree roots and rock piles provide shelter for resting and raising pups. Otters will also take over beaver lodges to use as their den.



North American River Otter

River otters are very well adapted to a life in and around water. They have a long and **streamlined** body, up to 0.9-1.2 meters in total length including their tail. Their legs are short and they have webbed feet. This, long, narrow body shape and webbed feet makes them fast swimmers and their long tail helps them move through the water. They have brown fur which is thick and waterproof which provides insulation, keeping them warm in cold water.

They have other adaptations for their aquatic lifestyle. First, they are able to close off the holes in their ears and nose so water does not enter while they are swimming. They can also hold their breath for almost eight minutes. Otters also have very long and sensitive whiskers to help them find their prey underwater. They find their prey by poking their nose and paws into cracks and logs and by digging in the mud.

Otters are carnivores or meat-eaters. Their main prey is fish, which is why it is important for them to be fast swimmers. They will also eat other aquatic wildlife such as **crustaceans** like crabs and crawfish, frogs, turtles, insect larvae and occasionally small birds and mammals. They can turn very quickly when hunting and catch prey with their sharp teeth. They will take larger prey onto the land to eat.

Otters have very interesting scat or droppings, known as **spraint**. They eat or consume many things with body parts that cannot be properly digested such as insect and crawfish exoskeletons, fish scales and animal bones. These leftover parts are visible in the otter's scat. Another interesting thing about their scat is that they actually have an area on land where they 'go' called a **latrine** site. A latrine is a simple toilet. A family or social group of otters all use the same latrine.



Otter spraint

Otters are very social and friendly animals and will live in family groups with a mother and her pups, or a group of male otters will live together. They communicate with growls, whistles, yelps, touch and even smells, by marking their territory and latrine. They are also quite playful. Otters will



North American River Otters





play in the water, chase their tails and will even slide into the water on their bellies. Soils with clay get quite slippery when wet which makes an excellent slide for entering the water. You can often tell if there are otters in an area due to the presence of latrines and slides.

Otters are important members of their aquatic ecosystems and the food web by regulating the populations of their prey. By controlling the numbers of fish, crustaceans and other prey, the plants that those animals would eat or consume are able to grow and thrive. Otters are also indicators of a healthy ecosystem. This means if you see otters in an area then the habitat is clean and healthy, so the more we conserve water and reduce pollution, the better it will be for otters and all wildlife.



Otter pups

Otter babies are known as pups. A female otter will usually have 2-4 pups which are born blind and helpless. She will raise her pups in a den until they become adults. Male otters do not help with raising the young. After about two months the mother will take her pups into the water and teach them to swim. Their playful nature helps them learn to swim and hunt. Otters will usually live to be 8-9 years old.



North American River Otter

If you ever see an otter in the wild, consider yourself lucky because they are shy towards humans. Next time you are in an ecosystem with water take a look for otter signs like scat and slides and you may be lucky enough to spot one playing in the water.



North American River Otters



North American River Otters

They do not have very many natural predators, but will occasionally be hunted by larger predators like alligators and coyotes. One thing that people commonly associate with otters is that they float on their backs. This behavior only occurs with sea otters. Sea otters are adapted to live almost completely in water and are content to sleep and float in the water. River otters are much more active and are adapted to life on land and water.

### WORD BANK

**Streamlined** - having a form that presents very little resistance to a flow of air or water

**Crustacean** - a groups of animals that includes crabs, lobster, shrimp

**Spraint** - otter droppings

**Latrine** - a simple toilet

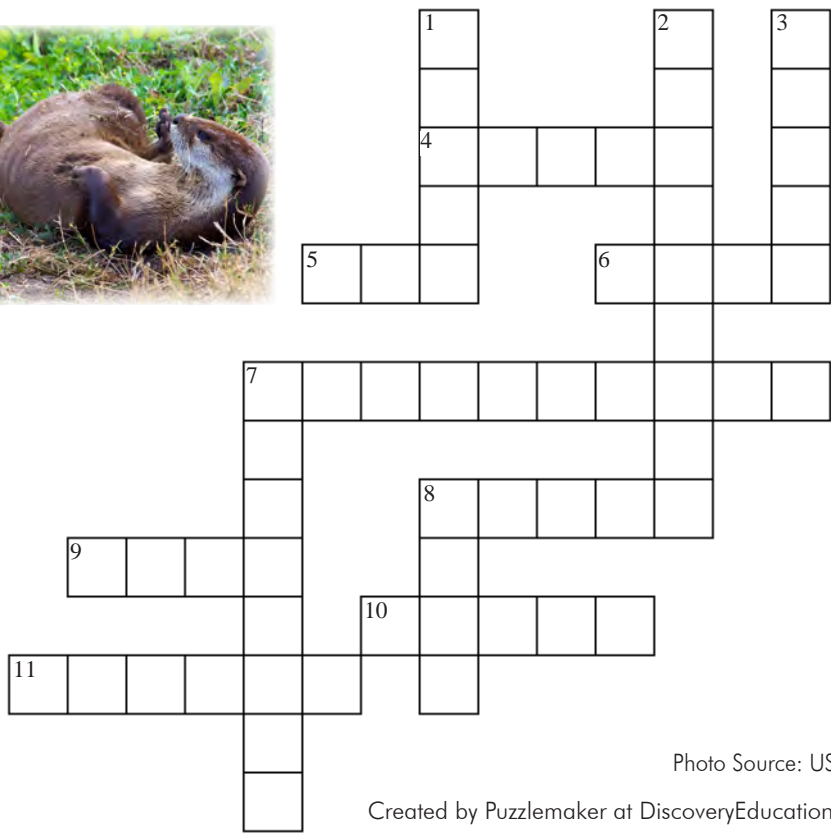
Source: National Geographic and Texas Parks and Wildlife  
Photos from Wikimedia Commons: Dave Pape, Ryan Hodnett, USFWS, Peter Llewellyn

# Otter Crossword

Fill in the blanks.

Across

4. The animal featured in this issue
5. An otter's shelter
6. An otter's prey
7. Otter's fur – resistant to water
8. A fun way otters enter water
9. Otter babies
10. A flowing body of water
11. Otter feet have this feature



Down

1. The color of an otter's fur
2. Meat-eater
3. Otters use these to catch their prey
7. Animals use these hairs to feel
8. The way animals move in water

Photo Source: USFWS

Created by Puzzlemaker at DiscoveryEducation.com



## Nancy's Corner



List something you learned about otters.

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Otters have webbed feet – draw another animal with webbed feet.



### Conservation Tips:

Participate in a river clean-up

Conserve water

Tell someone what you learned about otters



# Youth Education Programs

## Discovery Trunks

- \* 2-week reservations
- \* Seven wildlife topics
- \* Hands-on materials and lessons
- \* TEKS aligned for Grades K-8



## Distance Learning

- \* 20-45 minute programs
- \* Videoconferences & On-demand webinars
- \* TEKS aligned for Grades K-8



## Wildlife by Design

- \* Classroom Presentations
- \* 30-60 minutes in length
- \* Hands-on, inquiry-based learning
- \* TEKS aligned for Grades K-8



## L.A.N.D.S. Program

- \* Attend a workshop to receive natural resource lessons
- \* Hands-on classroom activities
- \* Field Investigation Days
- \* TEKS aligned for Grades 6-12



## Educator Workshops

- \* Provides hands-on training and lessons for educators
- \* Grades K-8 and grades 6-12 available
- \* 6-12 hours of CPE credits



## Trinity River Project

- \* Study along the Trinity River
- \* Water quality testing and analysis
- \* Hands-on, inquiry-based learning
- \* TEKS aligned for Grades 4-12



## Stewarding Texas

- \* 40 lessons about land stewardship and conservation
- \* Available online and in every Discovery Trunk
- \* TEKS aligned for Grades K-8
- \* Available at no cost



## Critter Connections

To receive a one-year subscription of *Critter Connections* go to:  
[www.texas-wildlife.org/program-areas/subscribe-to-critter-connections](http://www.texas-wildlife.org/program-areas/subscribe-to-critter-connections)  
 Critter Connections is made possible by a grant from the San Antonio Livestock Exposition, Inc.

# Join TWA Today!

[www.texas-wildlife.org](http://www.texas-wildlife.org)

TWA is a membership-based, non-profit organization whose goal is to educate all people, especially the youth of Texas about conservation, management and stewardship of wildlife and habitat on private land.

All education programs are made possible through memberships, grants and donations. Learn more about the levels of membership as well as the educational programs TWA offers on our website.

All membership levels include a one-year subscription to the TWA monthly *Texas Wildlife* magazine.

## Membership Levels:

\_\_\_\_ Family \$250      \_\_\_\_ Active \$150      \_\_\_\_ Associate\* \$75      \_\_\_\_ Online \$35

\* If you are an educator in the Texas please call the TWA office at 800-TEX-WILD for our educator discount.





# TEXAS WILDLIFE ASSOCIATION

# FOUNDATION

## Providing essential funding to the education programs of Texas Wildlife Association

Please consider making a tax-deductible investment to TWAF, and help us as we continue to change minds and lives, through natural resource education. Together, we can make sure that Texans understand the importance of wild things, wild places, and the stewards who care for them.



[www.twafoundation.org](http://www.twafoundation.org)