

FLINT CREEK OTTERS



A few years back, I was privileged to meet the Flint Creek otters. I was walking the dogs by the creek and a chorus of snorting and blowing assailed me from the water. Four heads were poking up and letting me know that I was not welcome on their territory. Once they had made their point, they disappeared, leaving me surprised and feeling very privileged to have seen such lovely but elusive creatures.

Fast forward a few years and the otters have made a firm claim to the area. They can frequently be seen swimming up and down the creek, or romping along the creek side either searching for food, mud sliding or being playful with each other – they

are very social animals. The area is prime real estate for them, being mainly wetland.

My neighbor Helen Heizyk has the best seat in the house for watching these shy, playful creatures. They can frequently be seen coming from the creek to her stocked pond for a snack or two. As an avid wildlife photographer, she takes full advantage of the opportunities they present to her.

They will often inhabit old deserted dens of beavers or muskrats; otters may even share accommodations with beavers. They

will winter in them and raise their young when the time approaches.

Spring is the time to raise their pups which are born blind and dependent. They will be fully dependent on their mother for the first three months of life. After that, they will stay with the family group for about 10 months before the kits set out in search of their own territory. The kits may travel up to 100 miles to find a new, suitable habitat.



OTTERS

story by Sue Norris, photos by Helen Heizyk



During the winter months we can often spot their tracks or see "slides" where they have been ice sledding. Otters can travel a significant distance relatively quickly and easily by sliding and running over the ice and snow. You can occasionally find a hole where they have broken through the ice. Scent piles can be found, which contain important information for other otters.

They are crepuscular by nature, so the best time to spot otters is around dawn and dusk, although we have seen them at other times. They are more active during daylight hours in

the winter months. When diving, they can submerge and stay under the water for eight minutes and may dive as deep as 60 feet.

These Flint Creek otters are possibly offspring from the otters that were introduced into the West River during the 1990s' capture and re-release program in Western New York. The program was a way of introducing these creatures back to areas where they had become almost unknown.

Otters are sentinel creatures of river health. Where they live you can be sure the waters are low in pollution. Pollution and over-hunting in many

areas were some of the reasons for their decline in the western Finger Lakes. Since they eat mollusks, crayfish, fish, turtles, insects and a variety of other tasty morsels that are bottom feeders, they also ingest any heavy metals or chemicals that are present in the water.

The otters have come to accept Helen and me as an occasional minor interruption in their lives; the older members of the clan do not even bother to dive when they see us. That kind of wary trust makes for great photos, as you can see.

We hope these beautiful creatures will continue to live among us for many years to come as they provide joy and hope to all that see them. 📷