

A Walk in the Woods - April 2011

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"One swallow does not make a summer, but one skein of geese, cleaving the murk of a March thaw, is the spring." Aldo Leopold

Spring is most certainly here. Of course this depends on your definition of spring as the recent snow storms have shown us. After a pretty rough winter the months of March and April do indeed test the New Englander's resolve. Despite the murky skies filled with wet heavy snowflakes spring is undeniable at this point. Geese and ducks can be seen around every bend in the river, the woodcock are singing in wet fields on some evenings, songbirds are singing every morning, bald eagles and hawks have been spotted migrating along the river, turkeys are strutting in the fields and of course the steam is rolling out of the sugar houses at an unprecedented rate.

The recent snow conditions make walking in the woods very easy. With no ground debris to trip you up and no bugs (yet) there is no better time to be out there. With the remaining snow on the ground it is easy to track the progress of much of our wildlife that is on the move this time of year.

Recently my walks in Benton and around Lakes Tarleton and Constance have revealed plenty of movement from one of my favorite fuzzy critters, the North American River Otter.

Did I say "land loving"? Well the river otter is more of an amphibious assault vehicle that actually travels great distances between watersheds as they patrol their territories. Otters are found on every continent except Australia and Antarctica and their home territories can measure between five and ten miles.

This propensity for travel is closely tied to the otter's ravenous appetite. Otters do not have a heavy layer of fat under their skin for insulation so to keep warm they must consume up to twenty percent of their body weight in food each day. Depending on the age and sex of the animal, otters must consume one to seven pounds of food daily! The metabolism of an otter is so high that they must consume up to 50% more food than any other North American land mammal.

Unlike beavers which are strict vegetarians and can shack up in a place until the food is gone, otters are carnivores and must hunt for their dinner. Thus otters are constantly on the move hunting for food. Despite their habit for land travel, the otter's food supply is closely tied to aquatic habitats and the bulk of their diets consist largely of frogs, fish, crayfish, crabs, and other aquatic invertebrates. Occasionally they will prey on birds,

rabbits, and rodents. Otters don't require large rivers for survival. I have found evidence of otters in the wilderness along headwater streams that were no wider than a few feet.

So how do you spot an otter? Otters can be spotted along any of our local rivers especially this time of year when they can be seen on the edge of the ice eating their lunch. Of course if you live near aquatic habitats such as streams rivers and beaver ponds your chances of casual observations increase dramatically.

Finding where an otter has been is easy. Otters are notorious sliders and their slides offer quick access to water and are a simple form of low energy travel. Slides can be sloping riverbanks or winter snow banks. No other animal that I know of leaves such a definitive sign. Slides are commonly 6-10 inch wide depressions in the snow and they are indeed a slide that can be many yards long.

It is currently twenty two degrees out and the dog is sleeping at my feet, woofing in his dreams. Somewhere out there an otter is happily sliding down a river bank for a swim in the icy water.

Enjoy your spring!