

## Party animals (re)make a home along the Rio Grande

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There is literally nothing as good as spending a hot weekend on the river. You've got sun, dogs, food, a little fishing and plenty of playing around. But few people know that the sands of the Rio Grande are home to another community of "party animals" — the river otter.

As river critters go, the otters — with their short muzzles and whiskers — are quiet, cute and low-key. Essentially, everything a raft guide is not.

Otters have thick fur and webbed feet, making ballets out of boulders through summer, thunderstorms and snow. When they duck into the water and stay under for up to four minutes, when they scuttle up and behind a rock, otters remind us of just how elusive and captivating they are.

Honestly, it's magical we get to see them at all. They make us work for it. And for so long, otters were missing from New Mexico.

But they have again made a home along the big river of New Mexico. Otters from the cold Pacific waters were released in the upper Rio Grande in a massive effort to bring the playful water mammal back to its native range. Taos Pueblo took the lead on the release, which ultimately saw 33 river otters take off from the banks of the Rio Pueblo de Taos between 2008 and 2010.

For the most part, the otters have been left to their own devices.

### Gone in a flash

To understand why otters were so enthusiastically brought back, one has to understand why they were gone in the first place.

Otters were once a part of the usual order of things along the river and its tributaries in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains.

"For us," said Michael Martinez, hunt coordinator for Taos Pueblo and a field technician during the release, "we want to restore things to their natural state as much as we can. The otters were here."

Even though they're mammals, otters were the top predator in their watery world.

"To have all the pieces there and functioning is what makes ecosystems work," said Valerie Williams, the biologist with the Taos Field office of the Bureau of Land Management. "The river is a complex food web. When we drop out a top predator, it affects every other thing."



# 'PARTY ANIMALS' (RE)MAKE A HOME ALONG THE RIO GRANDE

BY CODY HOOKS · CHOOKS@TAOSNEWS.COM · THE TAOS NEWS

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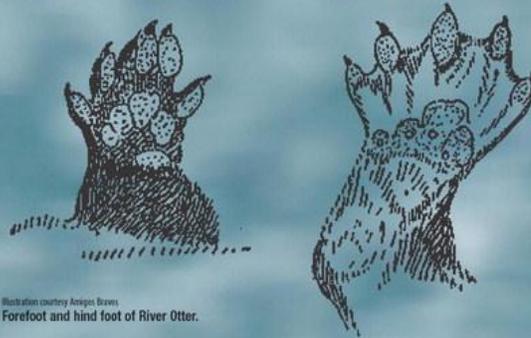


Illustration courtesy Amigos Bravos  
Forefoot and hind foot of River Otter.

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## Forefoot and hind foot of River Otter.

### Illustration courtesy Amigos Bravos

River otters shared the rough country of basalt boulders and grassy banks with a close neighbor: the beaver. Like all neighbors, they had their disputes. Otters take over abandoned beaver dens or, if real estate is in particularly short supply, they'll chase beavers off.

As William deBuys documents in his environmental history of the area, "Enchantment and Exploitation," beavers and otters weren't long for this world once the trappers came in.

Colonial Spanish government largely resisted trade with the U.S. But when Mexico fought for and won independence in 1821, an influx of fur trappers soon followed on the newly opened Santa Fe Trail.

Taos was a fur trapper's paradise for much of the 1820s and 1830s – and not just for the money to be made off of lush pelts. The moonshine was seductive, too.

The stretch of Rio Grande and its mountains between Santa Fe and Taos was the first one in the Southwest to be cleared of its beavers and otters — and in so little time. The last really good year for beaver pelts was 1824. Some steps were taken to stem the tide of trappers. Foreigners — Americans, that is — were excluded from hunting in New Mexico, though they found workarounds, like marriage and paying locals to buy permits. The Mexican government even enacted a six-year moratorium on beaver and otter trapping in 1838. It was too little too late. The animals were mostly gone.

The last otter known to have swum the waters of New Mexico was killed in the Gila in 1953. Groundwork

To be sure, there was evidence to suggest otters would do the 21st-century river ecosystem some good.

Otters love crawfish, an introduced species in the upper Rio Grande. When the crustacean is plentiful, it can be upwards to 100 percent of an otter's diet. The rest of the time, otters mostly eat fish. The top predator is more liable to take introduced fish species, like white sucker and carp, whose slow-moving ways make them easy targets. That, in turn, frees up habitat for trout.

Around 2000, a group of wildlife enthusiasts started getting together every month to talk about what it would mean to bring otters back to this part of the desert. The New Mexico River Otter Working Group was an alphabet soup of government agencies and environmental nonprofits from across New Mexico, including folks from Taos Pueblo, Amigos Bravos and the BLM.

They knew it could be done. At least 21 other states reintroduced otters, which came from elsewhere across the continent — Newfoundland, Oregon, Wisconsin, Michigan, Montana, Alaska and California. In most places, the otters thrived.

Before the group could legitimately advocate for a reintroduction, its members had to be absolutely sure otters were gone from New Mexico.

The Southwest river otter — a debatable subspecies with an inconsistent profile of scientific validity — was declared endangered in New Mexico in 1975, but was taken off that list in 1986 because none had been seen in the intervening decade.

“We had a lot of folks out looking for a long, long time,” said Williams. Biologists and raft guides paired up across New Mexico to look for the critters. Finally, they figured, there weren't any otters left to be found.

At last, in 2006, the working group published a feasibility study, naming the upper Rio Grande around Taos as the most obvious choice to reintroduce the aquatic mammals back to the state.

The Rio Grande, first and foremost, was once home to the otter. The river also has reliable flows of water year-round, non-native and slow-moving fish for food, plenty of riparian habitat and public land and big strips of the river that see little human traffic. Furthermore, it was highly unlikely otters would ever make their way back to the gorge on their own.

In 2007, the State Game Commission — a politically appointed body in charge making final calls on wildlife and reintroductions — gave otters the OK.

## Naughty otters

The search was underway.

The otters that eventually ended up in New Mexico didn't apply. They weren't recruited. They were "problem otters," captured in the estuaries of the Pacific Northwest.

All along the Puget Sound of Washington, plentiful otters are a pest. The animals get up on boats in ports and private docks. They gorge themselves and then rudely leave shells and scat. They're party animals.

It just so happened that a former biologist for Taos Pueblo, Darren Bruning, moved to Washington and worked with the otters. When the working group went looking for otters to relocate, Bruning knew where to find them. The long haul

Once the animals were collected in live traps on the Puget Sound, they were either flown or driven to New Mexico. The otters had to be kept as cold as possible for the transition from the Pacific Northwest to the dry desert of Taos. So the drives happened during the winter — with the air conditioning on — and took more than 30 hours each. No one talked so the animals wouldn't get agitated hearing human voices.

Like the groundwork that led up to New Mexico approving the reintroduction, the actual capturing, transportation and release of the otters was a monumental effort of coordination among the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, its Washington state analogue, veterinarians in Oregon and a team of biologists and volunteers from Taos Pueblo, who took charge of the actual release.

"I was in constant contact with them on their trip down from Washington," Martinez said. "People thought it would be a thing where they get to work at 8 a.m. No, no. The otters showed up in the middle of the night. We drove them to the rim and took them down to the gorge. We had headlamps, but it was a rough little path to the bottom," he said.

The otters were put in wooden cages designed just for them and stayed there for five days in order to acclimate to the new environment.

"I'd drop the fish in from the top of the box and I could hear them eating. It was the coolest thing. It sounded like a purring ... them crunching the bones and smacking up all the fish stuff. Very wild, very awesome," Williams said.

One by one, the animals were released. Some came out of their box sheepishly. Other jumped and scuttled to the water. They'd check out the scene, sniff around, get in the water, hop back to the bank.

Then they'd take off.

All told, 33 otters were released in Northern New Mexico from 2008 to 2010. Keeping an eye out

Being secretive, aquatic animals, otters are nearly impossible to track.

Taos Pueblo wanted the otters to live as naturally as possible. For that reason, they were never tagged with radio transmitters — a costly surgery that puts the animal at a greater risk for infection. Otter signs — scat and prints, primarily — look deceptively similar to other furbearers, like raccoons and muskrats. Even for a trained field biologist, they're hard to distinguish.

Based on the occasional photos from photographers and eyewitness reports from interested citizens and river rafters, people know the otters are doing very well. They've been seen all over the Wild Rivers area of the monument, near Pilar, through Velarde and as far south as Cochiti Reservoir. To the north, they've been seen at least up to the state line. Martinez said he's heard of sightings all along the Rio Pueblo and Rio Lucero.

Williams won't speculate on how many otters may now inhabit the upper Rio Grande. The 33 that were originally released was the number determined to give the species a jump-start at a sustainable population. Otters live between 10 and 15 years and have an average litter of about three pups. After eight years since the first otter took off from Taos Pueblo's tract A, Williams is sure the population is holding steady.

When it comes to getting more structured, in-depth and longterm data, "We need something we can put our hands on," she said.

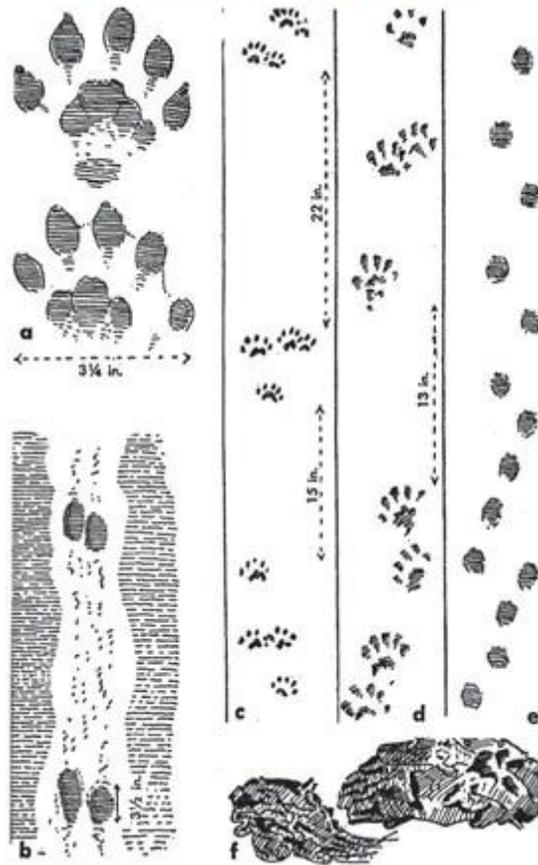
Since January, Amigos Bravos has monitored the otters with game cameras along the Rio Grande. Sure enough, they started seeing otters right away.

And a grant from the Rio Grande National Heritage Area will fund Amigos Bravos to get several more cameras and start a formal otter monitoring program. A volunteer training is planned for the fall.

Eventually, a monitoring program could even collect scat, which would be sent off to labs for DNA analysis. Biologists could start to piece together family trees, genetic profiles and somewhat accurate population counts.

As summer starts to wane and wind down, let's take a cue from our neighbors, the party animals, and get down to the river to enjoy the water.





Courtesy Amigos Bravos  
 otter tracks

**Otter tracks and scat**

- a Tracks in wet sand (Wyo., 1937).
- b Tracks in deep snow trough.
- c and d. Tracks of otter running in soft mud (Wyo., 1936).
- d Mixed gait, slowing to a walk, in soft sand (Yellowstone Lake, 1937)
- e Otter scat, about  $\frac{2}{3}$  natural size.

Courtesy Amigos Bravos

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