

# GETTING TO KNOW WILDLIFE

## Crash Course in Otter Care



By Kate MacNeil,

Education Coordinator,  
Ottawa-Carleton Wildlife  
Centre – [www.wildlifeinfo.ca](http://www.wildlifeinfo.ca)

It has been 13 years since I met my first river otter and it was love at first sight. From the moment the Centre's first pair of otters passed through the door things were never quite the same.

We had a lot to learn and fast! What do they eat? How long do we keep them? When should we introduce them to water? The answers only seemed to lead to more questions. Where do we find an endless amount of free, live fish? What do you mean they cannot be released back into the wild? What can we do to make sure they do not get pneumonia from getting a chill while swimming?

While we were busy finding out answers to these questions the pair of river otters chortled their way into the hearts of everyone they met. Talk about

having personality to spare!

Our fish shortage was solved by a gentleman who heard about the otters and started bringing live fish every few days. I would carefully fillet the fish for the otters.

One day I brought in some walnuts in the shell, thinking they could play with them and eventually maybe eat them. The female put one carefully in her mouth, and then chomped down, breaking it into tiny pieces. It was at this point I stopped filleting their fish! They could eat a foot long walleye and leave nothing behind.

We used to say the otters had two speeds on and off, there was no half way. Whether they were performing perfectly timed, synchronized swimming manoeuvres in their tiny pool, or happily grunting “what, what, what” to each other they were spectacular to watch and captivated all who saw them.

They were so much fun

that even when they caused mischief you could not help but laugh. One evening they broke out of their cage and had the party of the decade. The staff that saw the room the next morning thought the Centre had been vandalized. Stuffing ripped out of chairs, hoses on the floor full of holes, every last thing knocked off shelves. When they were discovered hiding in a pile of rubber boots they let out a low growl, as if they were mad to be sent back to their room! Needless to say they were in the off position for the rest of the day, sleeping soundly. I am sure they were dreaming of their adventure.

The longer they were at the Centre the more determined we all became that we had to give them a chance to live in the wild, even though the advice we kept getting was to find the best captive situation we could. Check back next week to find out how things turned out for this spirited pair of otters.