At left, curious river otter takes up tripod stance; its powerful tail helps to give support. Grooming by a

By David M. Schwartz

The comedian of America's wetlands stages a comeback

The North American river otter is frolicking in the wild in increasing numbers thanks to state restoration efforts and some innovative bartering.
If ever an animal did not need a PR agent, it's the river otter. Show me a man, woman or child who, after a five-minute introduction, casts an indifferent eye toward otters and I'll show you a stone-hearted curmudgeon incapable of melting to the allure of any creature great or small. I've not yet met one.

After all, we're talking cute. "Whatever it is that determines cuteness by the human perspective, otters fall right in," says Pat Foster-Turley, co-chairman of the otter specialist group of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN). "They are charming animals."

Maybe it's their vaguely humanoid features—the bluntly rounded face, the inquisitive eyes and beseeching look, the hirsute upper lip with its rakish mustache, the dexterous paws. Maybe it's the endearing demeanor of a mammal that humps along like a fur-covered Slinky toy on land, but in water transforms into a sleek, darting gymnast.

Quite possibly the otter's unimpeachable reputation is aided by a protean quality that allows it to resemble any number of other animals—most of which, as it happens, also score high in popularity. When faced with a curious human observer, an equally curious otter stands up on its hind legs like a prairie dog or meerkat. When poking its head and neck out of the water to survey its surroundings, it smacks of a glistening seal. When scrambling through vegetation, hell-bent on insinuating itself into the nearest body of water, it is a spaniel or retriever. Hauling its tubby torso out of the water as sunlight glints off stiff, translucent whiskers, it is a laughably undersized, under-toothed walrus.

But for all the otter's visual appeal, what it does is even more compelling than how it looks. For centuries, otter observers have celebrated this creature's clownish good humor and penchant for perpetual play. In the 15th century, Saint Albertus Magnus, whose writings on natural science fill 38 volumes, reported of the otter, "Alacris ad ludos est" ("Quick to the game is he"); more recently, Ed Park opened his 1971 book, The World of the Otter, with this claim: "If an otter can't have fun doing something, it just simply won't do it."

Undoubtedly, the biggest image boost came from Gavin...
Maxwell, whose *Ring of Bright Water* transported more than a million people to Camusfearna, the Highland cottage by the sea where he lived with two enchanting companions—the otters Mijbil and Edal. "Very few species of animal habitually play after they are adult," wrote Maxwell in his book that was made into a motion picture. "But otters are one of the few exceptions to this rule."

Indeed, the otter's playfulness seems to fly in the face of some behaviorists who insist that play exists only for its survival value. Young animals cavort to sharpen their reflexes, say the purists; they tussle to hone hunting skills. "But how do you explain adult otters sliding into the water and then, just for the heck of it, running up the bank and sliding back down again?" asks Foster-Turley, who has worked with three otter species in North America and Asia. Otters are notorious sliders, and are naturally winterized and waterproof. They throw themselves into their sport headfirst and belly down, usually ending the glissade with a whopping splash. Their wet fur glazes the clay- or snow-covered riverbank to a bobsledder's delight.

Given the chance, otters will make even so mundane a task as overland locomotion into a high old time. On snow or ice, they alternate loping steps with belly slides that carry them 10 or 20 feet. In this fashion, they can move along at 15 to 18 miles per hour. (Their sliding tracks—wide, flat trails across the winter landscape—are visible from low-flying aircraft, a fact exploited by biologists surveying otter populations.)

As a scientist, Foster-Turley hesitates to use the word "fun," but with otters she comes close. "When I see one balancing a pinecone on its nose, then pulling it underwater and letting it bob to the surface, then shooting up and jumping on it, there's nothing else to call it." After all, she points out, otters are quick-witted, skillful animals to whom a productive river or marsh is an unchallenging all-you-can-eat buffet. And when they've had their fill of fish, frogs, crabs and other delicacies, they've got time to kill. So why not play?

The delightful antics of otters do not seem to run in the family, taxonomically speaking. As members of the Mustelidae, otters are related to weasels, badgers, minks, skunks, fishers, wolverines, and a few other sinuous carnivores with long bodies, short legs and potent musk glands, but none of these has ever been accused of having a sense of humor. Most mustelids, including otters, are voracious predators who, pound for pound, are among the most powerful mammals on Earth. Many keepers of pet otters have confronted the
watered state of Missouri were peppered with descriptions such as “found in great numbers” and “plentiful.” But by the 1930s, two wildlife biologists surveying the same state had to conclude, “The otter is virtually extinct in Missouri.” Overtrapping had done them in.

Missouri is not alone. The river otter has been in decline in the broad swath of America’s midsection that encompasses the watersheds of the Ohio, Missouri and Mississippi rivers. But in the vast and watery wilderness of southern Louisiana’s bayou country, otters have held their own. This geographically determined fact, combined with the unique enterprise of a single Cajun family, is going far to replenish otter stock throughout the American heartland.

On the screened porch of a three-room building that his family calls the Otter Operations Center, I find Tom Sevin, a solidly built, bearded young man of 35, engrossed in the daily chore of mixing specially formulated “otter chow” in an industrial-grade meat grinder. Minutes ago, he had docked his boat ten yards away on the shore of Bayou Dularge and unloaded a fresh supply of ingredients. Dularge is one of five bayous that diverge in the nearby town of Houma and stretch out like a slightly twisted hand across the “toe” of Louisiana. Their sluggish waters teem with a rich biological gumbo that supports Louisiana’s vigorous otter population, which in turn supports the thriving Sevin family business, Bayou Otter Farm.

In blue jeans and a slightly soiled plaid shirt, Tom is apologetic about his attire but, in the sonorous, evoca-

The Eurasian otter, close kin of the river otter, has been protected in Europe for the past ten years.

Sociable giant Brazilian otters were practically exterminated by fur trade; they grow to eight feet.

Victim in Prince William Sound oil spill, the sea otter had earlier been making a comeback in Alaska.

Asian small-clawed otter has dexterous paws. It is the world’s smallest, weighing less than ten pounds.
tive tones of Cajun-accented English, pridefully eager to explain. "We're always out here working, looking like hobos," he says, dumping a basket of lemons and a measured cup of cod liver oil into the hopper. As we talk, I watch the blades churn them into a ruddy stew containing Purina Chick Starter and the ground meat of nutria, a large rodent abundant in southern Louisiana. At this time there are about 200 otters, individually caged, in another building—jokingly called the Ottertaurium. Tom motions to the adjacent room where his mother, Diane, is bottle-feeding two curled-up otter pups born three weeks earlier. "It's worth it," he adds, softening. "I love those little ones."

"I hate to see a dead otter"

It was just that sentiment, along with the need for cash, that led Diane and her husband, Lee Roy Sevin, to enter—rather, to invent—the otter business in 1957. Both grew up in the poverty of bayou-country subsistence, the children of trapper-fishermen who caught or raised most of their food, but couldn't earn enough money for other necessities. Lee Roy never knew the encumbrance of shoe leather until his first communion at age 10. As an adult, he scraped by as a trapper himself before discovering that he could pay other trappers ten times as much for live otters as they got for pelts, and still sell the otters for a handsome profit. Big-city zoos like those in New Orleans, Chicago and San Diego, as well as private roadside menageries and individuals wanting pet otters, responded to his classified ads in Fur, Fish and Game. "Lord, I got more letters than I could answer. They poured in." The business was launched. It was a double boon for Lee Roy Sevin, who, despite a life among trappers, readily admits, "I hate to see a dead otter."

Since trappers catch otters in fall and winter, and Northern customers want them delivered in spring, the Sevins had to figure out how to keep them healthy in captivity. To their surprise, they found that an all-fish or all-meat diet was not the ticket. Without fiber and vitamins, otters quickly fall ill—hence the chick feed, lemons and fish oil. (In the wild, they consume an occasional plant, along with the vegetable matter in the gut of their prey.) Just as important, the Sevins found, was an intangible ingredient they happened to have in great supply, love.

"If you want them to eat, you've got to talk to them," Lee Roy tells me after he joins us. He demonstrates on the 3-week-old otter puppy that Diane is holding. "You've got to say, 'C'mon baby, let's eat now, you little boogalee.'" His voice rises and falls musically, straying into falsetto on the Cajun endearment "boogalee." "I do this for two or three hours when they first come in. Sometimes it takes two or three days." Diane squeezes...