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In KwaZulu-Natal there are two otter species, the clawless otter *Aonyx capensis* and the spotted-neck otter *Lutra maculicollis*. Sometimes only one species is present at a freshwater habitat, or both occur together, invariably with the co-existing water mongoose *Atilax paludinosus*. Clawless otters occasionally also forage in the sea or in marine rock pools.

Sign

Otters and water mongooses are seldom seen, but if they occur in an area certain signs indicate their presence. The signs of otters are most frequently faeces (also known as scats or spraints); tracks; rolling places (areas of flattened grass or sand where otters have rolled to groom themselves); slides (places worn smooth by the bodies of otters entering or leaving the water); runs (paths, regularly used by otters, connecting two aquatic habitats); and dens (also called holts), which may be under bushes, in dense long grass, in natural holes or holes excavated by the otters themselves, or under roots of trees. Otter faeces are generally found close to water – on average 2 to 4 m from water; range 1-10 m.



Clawless otter

The upperparts are a dark chocolate brown. The chin, throat, sides of neck, cheeks and chest are white or off-white. The whiskers are very long, numerous, and white. It is the largest otter with a head and body length of about 900 mm.



The faeces of the clawless otter are the large: Mean diameter 25 mm, usually 22-29 mm. Their faeces are generally not tapered at both ends, as clawless otters rotate on the spot while defecating, causing the scats to break up (see photo). Scats most



frequently consist of fragments of freshwater crab, the clawless otter's main food. When fresh they are dark brown. As they get older the colour changes to cream, and the scats begin to break up. The rate of disintegration depends on rainfall.

The tracks are large (60-90 mm wide), and clearly indicate the absence of claws. In the diagrams the left fore foot on left, left hind foot on the right.



Spotted-necked otter

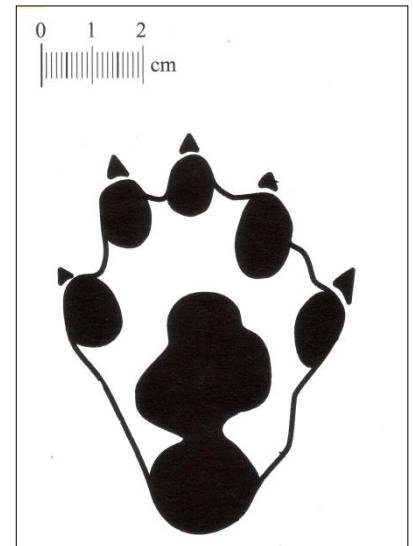
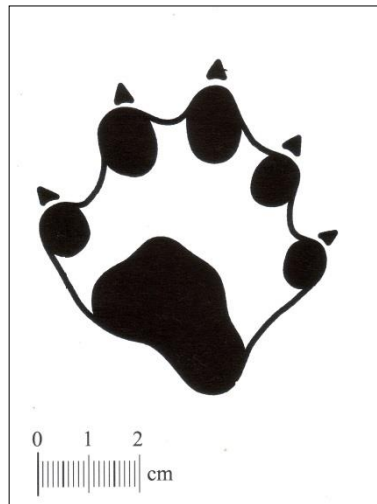


A small, sleek otter. The body is an overall dark brown colour with a varying amount (sometimes lacking altogether) of cream or white mottling on the throat and neck. Head and body about 600 mm long.



Faeces have a mean diameter of 15 mm, usual range 12-18 mm. If they contain a high proportion of crab remains they resemble clawless otter faeces in colour, but if mainly fish has been eaten, they are dark grey and fade to light grey.

Tracks are 40-45 mm wide, and have distinct claw marks, and sometimes impressions of the inter-digital webs. In the diagrams the left fore foot on left, left hind foot on right.



Water mongoose

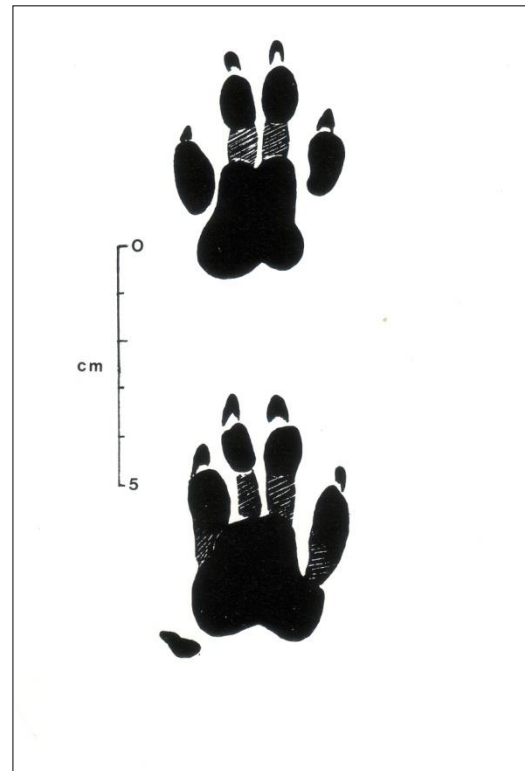
A dark grey, grizzly, long-haired coat, with a thick bushy tail. Overall appearance sometimes "salt and pepper". Head and body about 400 mm long.





Faeces are intermediate in size, having a mean diameter of 19 mm, range 15-22 mm. They often contain about 40-50% crab remains. Whereas the faeces of both otters have an odour reminiscent of crustaceans or fish, the faeces of the water mongoose smell like those of most other carnivores (e.g. dog or cat). Water mongoose hairs are usually present in the scats, as they groom themselves by licking their fur.

The tracks of the water mongoose are narrower (about 30 mm), with long narrow toe impressions, bearing distinct claw marks. Right front above, and right hind below.



Surveys

To establish whether or not otters occur at a locality, one should walk along the bank of a stream for about 1 km, searching for sign, then cross and search the other bank. This is usually sufficient to reveal the presence or absence of otters. At large lakes about 1 km of shoreline should be searched, and at impoundments (“dams”) sections of the shoreline should be searched, both near the wall and near and inlet.

Additional information

Illustrations and descriptions of the two otters, together with additional information on their biology, are contained in the Natal Parks Board Technical Guide N° 10: “Facts about otters”. Available from: data@kznwildlife.com . See also Rowe-Rowe, D.T. 1992. Survey of South African otters in a freshwater habitat, using sign. *South African Journal of Wildlife Research* 22:49-55. See also: “Field signs of otters the water mongoose”, available from dtr.rowe@gmail.com

Refer to as:

Rowe-Rowe, D.T. 2011. Otter surveys: a simple and quick method. Unpublished. 3pp.