# UNL Wildlife unit tracks river otters by collecting feces



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Scooping otter poop has never been so useful.

If the results of a University of Nebraska-Lincoln study come back as planned, researchers will be able to devise a population management plan for rare river otters based on samples of the creatures' poop.

No one ever said research was glamorous.

While it's possible that river otters are no longer technically endangered, they're still considered a Tier 1 species in Nebraska, meaning they're the most in need of conservation.

"That's largely because they were once extinct (in Nebraska), and now we don't know how many there are," said Craig Allen, leader of the Nebraska Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit and professor in UNL's School of Natural Resources.

Otters vanished from Nebraska around 1900 but were reintroduced in the late 1980s and early '90s. Since that reintroduction, "We know otters are out there, but almost nothing else," Allen said. He's hoping 300 dried-out poop samples can help solve the mystery.

Once in late September and again earlier this month, Allen's team canoed a 13-mile stretch of the Platte River in search of river otter scat, the proper name for otter poop. They collected hundreds of samples, which have since been sent to a lab for DNA analysis.

It's unlikely they have a scat sample for every river otter living in the Platte, but they'll compare the 150 collected in September with the other 150 gathered in October to see how many otters' DNA they "recaptured" during that second swipe. They'll use that information to generate an estimate of the overall river otter population there.

River otters' scat had never been used before to determine the extent of their presence in Nebraska, Allen said. He and his fellow researchers have trapped live otters in the past to monitor their movements, but the process is difficult and inefficient for estimating the entire river otter population.

"With rare and elusive animals like otters, you can't really (trap) effectively," said Amy Williams, one of Allen's graduate students working on the project.

They're difficult to capture in the first place because baited traps catch raccoons and possums more than they do otters, and they're smart enough to avoid getting trapped twice. Allen's team has only managed to capture and tag 18 otters over four years.

That makes their poop all the more appealing. It's abundant and easy for researchers to find along river shorelines because otters often use communal latrines (the equivalent of communal toilets) on the downriver side of sandbars and areas free of vegetation.

The DNA results from the scat won't be available for several months, so it's too early to say for sure if the waste can be hyped as scientific gold. But if it goes as Allen's team is hoping, "The method can in turn be used more widely across the state to determine what the status of river otters is in Nebraska," Williams said.

However, for now the project's "kind of a proof of the pudding kind of experiment" until something solid can be taken from it, Allen said.

Something more solid than just poop.

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Adam Ziegler contributed to this report.



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