

Waterloo's Aquatic Weasels



The Portage River (pictured above) originates in Big Portage Marsh in the northern part of the Waterloo Recreation Area. It flows west into the Grand River and eventually into Lake Michigan. Once a winding stream, it was dredged and straightened by the Army Corps of Engineers so that land along its banks could be drained for farming.

Silt, downed trees and debris have accumulated over years and now impede water flow. Once again the river spills over its banks in spring and during wet years. Much of the land along its route is no longer tilled and is reverting to riparian wetlands, creating important wildlife habitat. Many species are returning including the American Mink and River Otter described here.

American Mink



American mink are frequently seen swimming in the Portage River, running along banks, fallen logs and even climbing trees. They also inhabit many area wetlands.

Their elongated bodies allow them to follow prey into holes and burrows. They are formidable predators of muskrats, which are chased underwater and killed in their burrows.

They live in dens consisting of long burrows in river banks, lake shores, and the shoulders of roads adjacent to wetlands.

River Otter



River Otters are highly aquatic. They have webbed feet and dense fur, which is essentially water proof. In addition, they have a thick layer of fat under the skin that further insulates them from the cold water and cold weather of winter. They can close their ears and nostrils while diving to keep out water.

They appear to be playful animals, exhibiting behaviors such as mud/snow sliding, burrowing through the snow, and water play. Many “play” activities actually serve a purpose. Some are used to strengthen social bonds, to practice hunting techniques, and scent mark. River otters get their boundless energy from a very high metabolism, which also requires them to eat a great deal during the day. They eat frogs, fish, turtles, crayfish and other invertebrates. Birds, their eggs, and small terrestrial mammals are also eaten on occasion.

At least one pair of river otters make the Portage River their home. Because the river is now so choked with fallen trees, it is very difficult to navigate, even in a kayak or canoe.