A New Chapter for McGraw’s Center for Wildlife Research

Photo by Jeff Nelson/Forest Preserve District of Cook County.

For more than a decade, McGraw’s Center for Wildlife Research has been at the forefront of urban wildlife ecology in the Chicagoland area through projects such the internationally acclaimed Urban Coyote Study.

Now there’s a new story to be told. On Nov. 2, a 20-pound male river otter (left) was captured in southern Cook County, Illinois, marking the start of what will become the Urban River Otter Project. Researchers from McGraw and other institutions will examine some of the most basic questions concerning otters in local wetland systems.

“Through the research methods of telemetry tracking we hope to better understand habitat selection in urban environments, which can then be directly applied to habitat restoration projects aimed at benefiting the health of urban river otters,” said Shane McKenzie, McGraw research scientist. “River otters are an important indicator species on the quality of water and aquatic wildlife habitat.”

McKenzie noted that local otter sightings have increased in the last few years. “These sightings include areas not far from the McGraw property in the Hoffman Estates Poplar Creek Forest Preserve,” he said.

The project is part of ongoing collaborations involving the Max McGraw Wildlife Foundation, the Cook County Forest Preserve District, Cook County Animal and Rabies Control, and The Ohio State University. Just finding a river otter in Cook County is rather remarkable, and is a testament to the improving water conditions in our local rivers and lakes.

Otters were pretty much eradicated from the state by the turn of the 20th Century, due to a combination of factors, not least of which were pollution, habitat destruction and intensive trapping pressures.

In the early 1990s, a reintroduction program was put into place in Illinois. According to Chris Anchor, the senior wildlife biologist for the Forest Preserve District of Cook County, the closest release site for this reintroduction program was 150 miles south of where Otter #1 was captured – meaning that the animals have thrived, are reproducing and expanding their range across the state.
After his capture, the otter was taken to the Brookfield Zoo, where veterinarians surgically implanted a transmitter to allow biologists to track his movements. He was then returned to the wild, near the site of his capture.

Within a week, the McGraw research team under the direction of Dr. Stanley Gehrt began tracking this otter using the same methods as they used to follow urban coyotes. With time, this otter and others to follow will help us understand how we as people can protect our environment through conservation efforts.

The research team members include McKenzie, Abby-Gayle Prieur, Andrew Burmesch, Sean Sullivan and Emily Mitchell.

If you are interested in learning more about Otter #1, please visit the YouTube link below.

Otter #1