

# URBAN OTTERS

## WHAT IS AN OTTER?

The Cape clawless otters (*Aonyx capensis*) is a freshwater otter species found in permanent water bodies throughout sub-Saharan Africa. It is the third largest species of otter in the world. In False Bay, and Cape Town in particular, this otter has adapted to life beside the ocean, and quite often beside humans too. Let's take a closer look at the unique lives of our local "urban otters".

## WATERPROOF FUR

To stay warm, otters depend solely on their thick fur - guard hairs cover the body, acting as insulation. Since otters lack an insulating layer of body fat, their only means of warmth is provided by their thick coat of fur.

## INTELLIGENCE

Otters are intelligent and playful by nature, with larger brains that one would expect for a mammal of their size. This natural curiosity enables otters to adapt to new environments, which is why Cape Town's urban otters have found ways to turn canals, ponds and stormwater drains into effective habitats.

## SCENT GLANDS

Territories are marked using a pair of anal glands which secrete a unique scent. Each otter is very territorial over its particular range.

## LUNGS

An otter's lung capacity is more than twice that of similarly sized land mammals. Cape clawless otters have been observed holding their breath for up to eight minutes, which gives them plenty of time to look for food in the dark!

## CLAWLESS FINGERS

As their name suggests, these otters lack claws on their front paws. This makes their fingers and opposable thumbs great tools for digging on the muddy bottoms of ponds and rivers, picking up rocks and looking under logs. Despite their name, they do have three small claws on each of their back feet.



## SMELL

Extremely sensitive whiskers on both the upper and lower jaws are used as sensors in the water to pick up the movements of potential prey.

## TEETH

Cape clawless otters have large molars, specialized for crushing crustaceans and fish skulls, and no cutting teeth. The shape of their molars varies geographically.

## FLATTENED TAILS

Their tails are flattened and are used for locomotion and propel them through the water. They are also used for balance when walking or sitting upright.

## WEBBED PAWS

Their rear paws have partially webbed toes, that allow them to swim and move on land with ease. Of all otter species, Cape clawless otters have the least webbing - a result of their need to move about effectively on land.

## DIFFERENCE BETWEEN URBAN AND NON-URBAN OTTERS

Unlike their wilder counterparts, urban otters have learned to avoid the hustle and bustle of human activities. Otters in wild environments are crepuscular (meaning they are active at dawn and dusk) whereas urban otters are largely active during the day.



**Please don't**

Attempt to cuddle or hold the otter



**Please do**

Take a photo to share your love of otters



**Please don't**

Let your dog off the leash



**Please do**

Keep your distance & let the otter have its space



**Please don't**

Feed the otter