Interactions Between Bald Eagles and North American River Otters

By Annamarie L. Beckel

Bald Eagles (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) and North American river otters (*Lutra canadensis*) often occur in the same areas, especially during winter months in northern United States and Canada, when both predators are attracted to areas with open water. Observations I conducted in northcentral Wisconsin suggest that eagles may occasionally attempt to take prey from otters.

During the winter and spring of 1977 and 1978, I observed free-ranging river otters on an ice-free section of the Tomahawk River in northcentral Wisconsin. The number of otters seen during any single observation period ranged from 0 to 8.

A pair of eagles also used this area during both winters, and in 1977, an immature eagle was with the pair. The aerie was located about 50 m from a den and latrine site frequently used by the otters. Both river otters and eagles were often active simultaneously during early morning and early evening observation periods.

In more than 200 hours of observations, eagles "attacked" otters twice. On 26 March 1977, about 1640 CST, three adult otters were feeding and occasionally wrestling in a section of the river partially covered by thin ice. I was about 50 m from the otters and shielded from view by vegetation. At 1642 CST, one of the otters caught a large fish (30 to 35 cm. long), which appeared to be either a Northern Pike (*Esox lucius*) or a Muskellunge (*Esox masquinongy*). The otter came out onto the ice and began eating the fish. The other two otters were sitting about 1 to 2 m from the one that was eating. At 1645 CST, an adult eagle swooped over the otters. Its feet were extended toward them and it came within a meter of the otters. The otters immediately dived, the one taking the fish. Within 8 to 10 seconds, all three came back out onto the ice, one still carrying the large fish. Although the eagle was sitting in a tree about 200 m from the otters, they did not seem wary of it, and remained in the area feeding and occasionally wrestling until 1705 CST.

On 15 May 1978, at 1852 CST, two adult otters were swimming near the river bank. I was about 50 m from the otters and again blocked from view by vegetation. One of them caught a large fish (25 to 30 cm long). Both otters came out on the bank and one began eating the fish while the other one sat nearby. About 1853 CST, an adult eagle that had been in a tree about 30 to 40 m from the otters swooped down on the otters close enough to have touched them. Both otters quickly entered the water, the one taking the
fish. They came back out on the bank a few seconds later, one still carrying the fish, and went behind a clump of birches. The eagle resumed sitting in the tree it had been in previously. At 1855 CST, the otters entered the water and swam about 250 m to another section of the river where they foraged until about 1940 CST.

On both occasions, the fish captured by the otters were unusually large (25 to 35 cm long). Rarely did the otters catch fish that large. Most fish caught and eaten by the otters in this group are about 8 to 15 cm long. When the eagle swooped over the otters, it is more likely that the eagle was after the fish rather than the otters. Eagles occasionally prey on sea otter pups (*Enhydra lutris*) (Kenyon, K.W., N. Am. Fauna 68, p. 280, 1969; Krog, J., Condor 55: 299-304, 1953; Sherrod, S.K., Estes, J.A., and White, C.M., J. Mammal. 56: 701-703, 1975), but there are no reports of eagles preying on North American River Otters.

Although eagles were observed to “attack” otters only twice, otters active (feeding, wrestling, grooming, and so forth) on the ice surface or on the river bank frequently dived rapidly when eagles flew overhead, and occasionally otters responded similarly to ravens (*Corvus corax*). A few seconds after diving, the otters always returned to the surface where they previously had been and resumed their activities. On other occasions, however, otters gave no apparent response to either eagles or ravens flying overhead. The number of observations in which otters responded to eagles was about equal to the number in which they did not respond, and it appeared to make no difference whether the eagles were calling or silent as they flew over.

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