

ABOUT OTTERS.

BY JOHN LEWEES.

AMONG the animals that live partly in the water and partly on the land, that can run about on the shore and breathe the air just as well as we can, and yet dive under the water and swim like a fish, one of the most interesting is the otter. A common otter is about the size of a small dog, having a narrow body two feet long, and very short legs. It is covered with handsome fur next to its skin, and outside of this there is a coat of long, coarse hair.

As this animal is very fond of the water, and lives principally on fish, it makes its home on the shore of a creek or river. This home is a hole under-ground, generally quite close to the water. The entrance to the burrow is always under water, and leads upward to the main apartment, which is dug out as high up in a bank as possible, so that, in case of a flood in the stream, the water will not rise up along the entrance-way and into the otter's house. Sometimes the animal makes two or three chambers, one above another, so that, in case the water should rise in a lower room, he and his family could go up higher, and keep dry. He does not mind being under the water for a time, but he can not live under water. From the top of his house up to the surface of the ground he makes a small hole to let in air; so, you see, the otter is a very clever creature. The entrance to his house is hidden under water, where no dog nor other enemy is likely to find it, or to get in if they do find it; and his home is so well planned that some part of it is always dry and well ventilated.

When the otter wants his supper,—for, as he eats only at night, it may be said that he takes neither breakfast nor dinner,—he slips quietly into the water, and as soon as he sees a fish, he gives chase to it. He has large, full eyes like a seal's, and he can see in the water as well as on land. He is web-footed, and his long, flexible body and stout tail enable him to move through the water with a motion very much like that of a fish. He can thus swim very fast, and few fish are able to escape him.

During the day-time, the otter generally stays quiet in his burrow, but at night he comes out, and makes it very lively for the fish. Sometimes, when fish are scarce, he will do his midnight hunting on land, and will be glad to catch a chicken or any other small animal he may meet.

If an otter is caught when it is quite young, it may be tamed. I once saw a couple of tame ones in New York, and they were as lively and playful

as a pair of terrier dogs. Sometimes tame otters are trained to catch fish for their masters. In this kind of fishing, the otter slips quietly into the water, and generally catches first all the fish he wants to eat himself. When he has had enough, he brings the next one he catches to his master. A very well-trained otter will go into the water several times in this way, and frequently will bring out a large fish each time. Otters are occasionally employed by fishermen who use nets. The nets are first set, and then the otters go into the water and drive the fish into the nets, where they are caught.

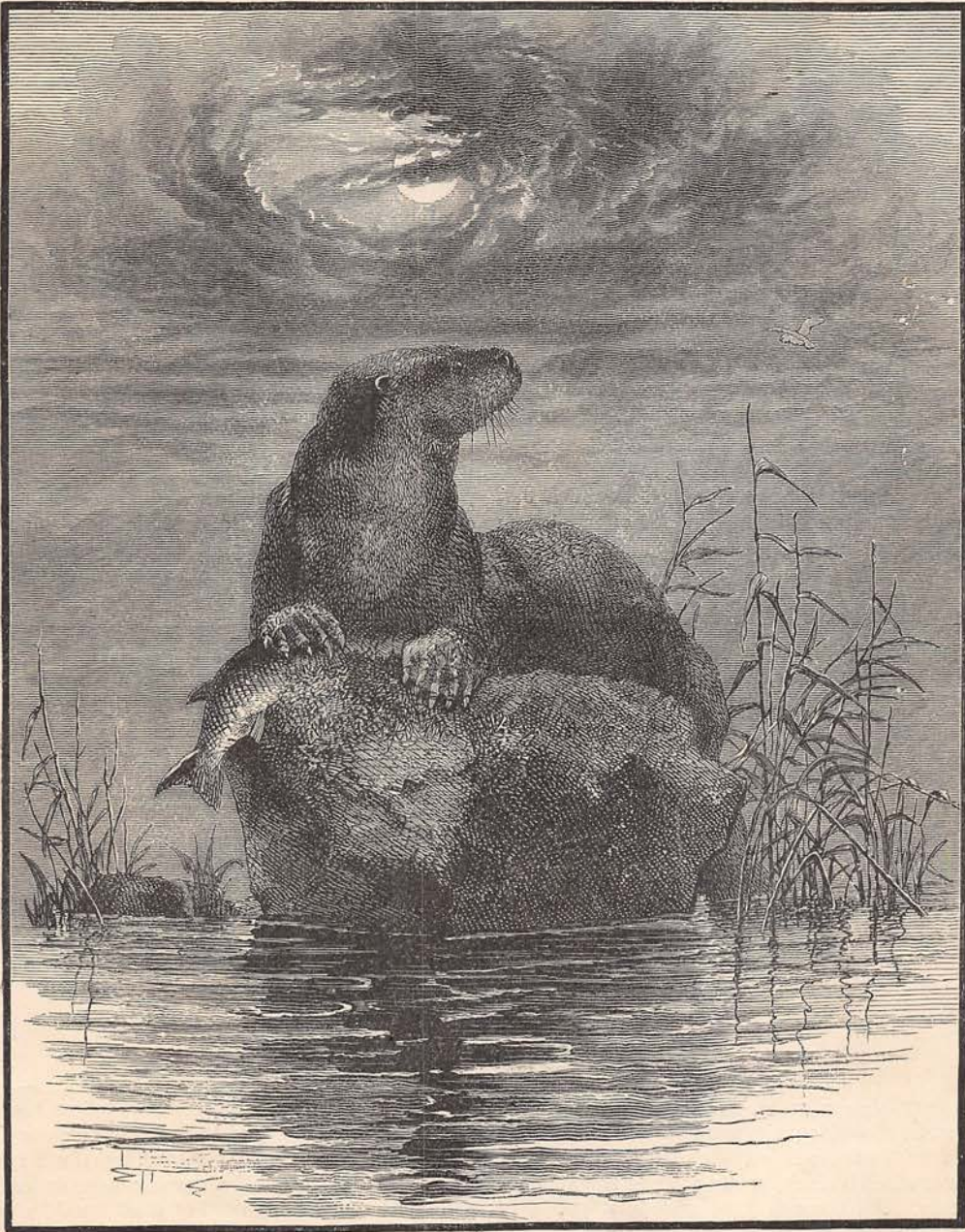
There is a story told of a man in England who had a tame otter which followed him about on shore like a dog, and which, also, used to fish for him. The two companions would go out on the river in a boat, when the otter would jump overboard, and bring fish back to the man. If the animal staid away too long, his master would call him by his name, and he would immediately return.

One day the man was away from home, and his young son thought it would be a good idea to take his father's otter and go fishing. So he took the little animal into the boat, and rowed out upon the river. The otter jumped into the river exactly as he used to do for the boy's father, but he staid below a long time, and when the boy called him he did not come back. Either he did not know his name when spoken by a strange voice, or he did not like the boy well enough to come back to him, for he remained out of sight, and after the boy had called him in vain for a long time, he was obliged to return to shore without him.

Several days after this, the man was walking along the river-bank near the place where his son had gone fishing. He was greatly grieved at the loss of his pet otter, and I expect the boy had been whipped. The man stood at the edge of the water, and began to call the otter by his name. He did not think there was any particular use in doing this, but it reminded him of his little friend and of old fishing times. But you can scarcely imagine his astonishment when, in a few moments, his faithful otter came swimming out of the water, and lay down on the shore at his feet. If he had brought a string of fish along with him, I do not think the man could have been more surprised and delighted.

In India and some other Eastern countries, this fishing with tame otters is made quite a business.

Bishop Heber tells us that on the bank of a river in Hindostan he once saw eight or nine fine large otters tied to stakes driven into the sand. These otters were used for fishing, their native masters did not set them loose and allow them to swim about as they pleased ; but made them go



THE OTTER AT HIS SUPPER.

hand some fellows were either lying asleep on the shore or swimming about in the water as far as their ropes would let them. It is likely that when into the water with the long cord still fastened to their necks. In this way the otter could swim far enough to catch fish, and his master would be

always sure of having his otter, whether he got any fish or not.

In England, otter-hunting used to be a favorite amusement, and in some parts of the country it is carried on yet. A certain kind of dog, called the otter-hound, is especially trained for this sport, and the hunters use short spears. Some of the hunters and dogs go on one side of the stream where otters are expected to be found, and some on the other. If an otter has recently been along the bank, the dogs catch his scent, and they bark and howl, and scratch the ground, and the men shout and beat the reedy bushes and the shore until the poor otter is frightened out of his house, and takes to the water. But here he is discovered by the bubbles of air which come up where he is breathing, and the men wade into the stream and strike at the place where they suppose the otter is. The dogs, too, sometimes go into the water, and in this way the otter is either killed or driven ashore. When he goes on land he generally shows fight, and the dogs often have a very hard time before he is killed.

There are otters, however, which are much better worth hunting than the common otter. These are the great sea-otters, which are found in the regions about Behring's Straits and in Kamtschatka, also in some of the waters of South America. These are much larger than the common otter, some of them weighing seventy or eighty pounds. These animals are hunted for the sake of their fur, which is very valuable, and they are probably not

so active and difficult to kill as the common otter, which has so many enemies that it is obliged to be very cunning and courageous. Up in those cold regions where the sea-otter lives, he is only occasionally disturbed by man, and probably never by any other creature. These otters do not appear to pursue ordinary fish in the water, but feed upon lobsters and other shell-fish.

Sea-otters are said to be very affectionate to their young, but it is not likely that they are more so than the common otter; the difference probably is that the sea-otter is much less wild and shy than the common otter, and its habits and disposition toward its young are therefore more easily observed. Ordinary young otters, even when mere infants, will, at the slightest sign of danger, pop into the water with their parents, and come up in some spot among the reeds and grass where it is impossible to see them.

There is an animal in this country which is placed by some writers in the otter tribe, although we do not generally consider it as such. This is the mink, or minx, and it is a great deal more troublesome to us than any ordinary otter; for it does not confine itself to catching fish, but will come into a barn-yard and kill chickens or any other poultry it can lay hold of. Its work, like that of the common otter, is done at night.

The fur of all the otter family is soft and valuable, and if it were not for this fact, there would probably be a great many more otters in the world than there are now.



THE PORTER'S IRON COLLAR.

BY DAVID KER.

ABOUT sixteen miles from St. Petersburg, in the midst of a wide plain, stands the Czar's country palace of Tsarskoe-Selo (Czar's Village), the great park of which is a very pretty place in fine summer weather. All through June and July, you may see the Russian children running about under the trees by scores, with a shouting and laughing that would do the Czar's heart good to hear, if he were anywhere within reach. In every shady spot you are pretty sure to find a picnic party making merry

on the grass, with two or three well-filled lunch-baskets beside them; and when you come to the little summer-houses near the lake, you will most likely find at least half a dozen people in each, gathered around a big bowl of *prostokvash*, which is the Russian name for curds and cream.

This lake is one of the great "sights" of the park, for it has a boat-house filled with a model of every kind of boat in the world, down to Greenland fishing-boats and Polynesian war-canoes; and