

Canadian Natural History.

The Canadian Otter.

(Lutra Canadensis, Sad.)

THE Otter species are found in all parts of the globe, and are distinguished with difficulty, from the similarity of their colours. As a persevering and destructive enemy to fish, the Otter has attained a notoriously wide-spread reputation. It is possessed of a dainty palate, and invariably selects the choicest specimens of the finny tribes. It is an excellent swimmer and a splendid diver, remaining for a considerable time water without inconvenience. The salmon and speckled trout are its favourite food, and it accordingly frequents the clear rapid streams, in search of these dainties. Not unfrequently, it kills several fish,—devouring only the fine flaky meat which is found on the shoulders.

The Canada or American Otter is peculiar to this continent, and, in size, is much larger than the European species. The fur, which somewhat resembles that of the beaver, both above and below, is shining brown; and the length of the animal from the nose to the root of the tail, is about forty-two inches. In the winter, it frequents rapids and falls, for the advantage of the open water, and if its usual haunts become frozen over it frequently travels a great distance through the snow in search of some shoal or fall that has resisted the frost. "When seen and pursued by the hunters, as it is on these journeys, it throws itself forward on its belly, and slides through the snow for several yards, leaving a deep furrow behind it. This movement is repeated with so much rapidity, that even a swift runner on snow-shoes, has much trouble in overtaking it. It also doubles on the track with much cunning, and dives under the snow to elude its pursuers."

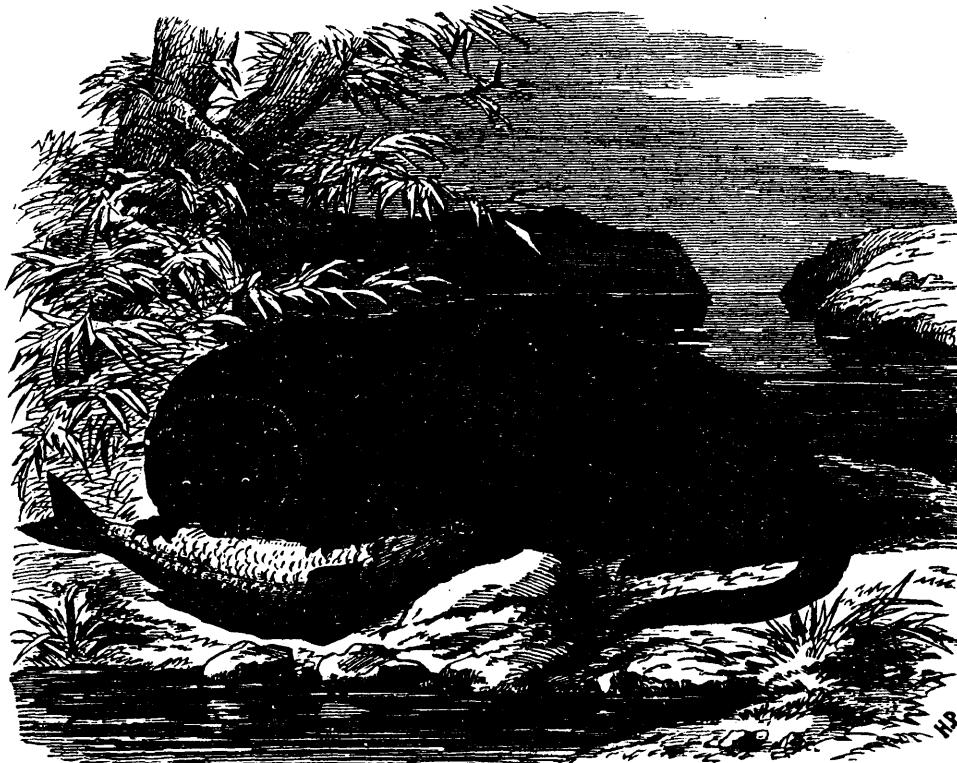
All the species of the Otter are gregarious and rambling in their habits. They frequently indulge in the somewhat singular amusement of sliding down wet and muddy banks, and ice-slopes. This practice is taken advantage of by the trappers, who place sunken steel traps in places where the animals are accustomed to "slide." Goodman tells us that "they are fond of sliding down hills in winter, upon the snow banks, going on their bellies, feet first, in the manner of a parcel of school-boys "coasting," as it is called in New England. They are said to enter into the sport with great spirit, and to pursue it with intense eagerness and delight.

The body of the Otter is lithe and serpentine. The toes are connected with a broad web, which proves of immense service in propelling the animal through the water. The tail is about eighteen inches in length, and is broad, flat, and strong,—rendering it a most effective rudder. The legs are short, powerful, and loosely jointed, so that the animal can turn them in almost any direction. The latter peculiarity of its formation imparts a strange "waddle" to its movements on land.

The Otter burrows in the banks of streams, lining its nest with leaves and grass, the entrance being

under water. The female is said to go with young nine weeks, and to produce from three to five young ones in April or May. When taken young, the Otter may be easily tamed, and trained to fish, for the benefit of its owner. Mr. McDiarmid, in his amusing "Sketches from Nature" gives an account of several domesticated Otters, one of which, belonging to a poor widow, "when led forth, plunged into the Urr or the neighbouring burn, and brought out all the fish it could find. Another, kept at Crosbie House, Wigtonshire, "evinced great fondness for gooseberries, fondled about her keeper's feet like a pup or kitten, and even seemed inclined to salute her cheek when permitted to carry its freedoms so far."

In preceding "Sketches," we have had occasion to describe some striking examples of animals and birds, in which the principle of terrestrial destruction is manifested. In the Otter, we find another development of the same idea. Indeed this animal has been appropriately denominated, by the Rev. J. G. Wood,—"the destroyer of the waters,"



In the popular "Natural History" of that author it is spoken of as follows:—"In order that we may rightly appreciate the part that the Otter plays in the great and ever-changing drama of nature, it needs that we should as far as possible place ourselves in the position of the creatures among whom its destructive mission is fulfilled.

"A shoal of fish is swimming quietly through the clear stream, thinking of nothing but themselves, their food, and their physical enjoyment of existence. Suddenly, from some unknown sphere, of which they can form no new conception, comes flashing among them a strange and wondrous being, from whose presence they flee instinctively in terror. Flight is in vain from the dread pursuer, which seizes one of their companions in its deadly grasp, and in spite of the resistance of the struggling prey, bears it away into an unknown realm, whose wonders their dim sight cannot penetrate, and whose atmosphere is too ethereal for their imperfect frames to breathe and live. Ever and anon the terrible pursuer is mysteriously among them, like the devouring angel among the Egyptians, and as often as it is seen, snatches away one of their number in its fatal grasp, and vanishes together with its victim into the unseen realms above. To the fish, the Otter must appear as a supernatural being, for it comes from a world which is above their comprehension, and returns thereto at will, a visible and incarnate Death."

THE INDIAN PIED KINGFISHER.—When out shooting to-day I wasted a good deal of time watching one of the prettiest sights in bird life, I think, to be seen in the world—the fishing of the Indian pied kingfisher on a still day and on a clear piece of water. To-day the water was as clear as glass, and the little birds were numerous and confiding to a degree. I never saw birds so indifferent to the noise of shooting. They seem to know that no one will molest them. I am sure hundreds of sportsmen in India, the most indifferent to the beauties of nature in the shape of bird economy, must sometimes pause and take notice of this beautiful little fisherman. Just after you have fired a shot, even as the smoke is clearing away, you see him hovering within a few yards of your head—so near, in fact, that you can see his eye as he peers into the glassy water, at a height of from ten or fifteen to twenty or forty feet. He comes dancing along with a jerking flight, then rises gradually up to his pitch, and poises himself, hovering sometimes a minute or more, then comes down with surprising

velocity, headforemost and wings closed, completely disappearing under the water, and making a noise you at first hardly believe possible by so small a bird. He then rises laboriously with a small bright silvery fish in his mouth. If he fails he does not stop to rest, but works away till he succeeds.—E., Indian correspondent of the London Field.

OYSTERS.—But whatever may be the cause, the fact is certain, that the press of Paris begins to smell strongly of oysters, and the journalists find some amusing things to say about them. One writer, lamenting the cost of his favourite *hors d'œuvre*, says, in the spirit of *Francois premier*, when decreeing the admission of ladies to the court of France: "A repast without oysters is a discourse without exordium, an opera without an

overture, a house without a vestibule. It is perhaps necessary, for those who are not acquainted with French habits, to mention that oysters are always eaten in Paris at the commencement of *dejeuner* or dinner, by the dozen or half-dozen, as an overture or exordium, the benighted Parisians not having yet arrived at the knowledge of oysters and stout after the theatre. The same writer, with a cunning notion perhaps, of shutting up some of the avenues of consumption, tells his readers—especially the fairer portion of them—that they positively eat the oysters alive, and expresses his surprise that the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals has not already interfered to put down *ostreicide*; for, he asks, if it would be wrong to eat a live animal, can it be a proof of honourable conduct to eat one before it is dead?—*Land and Water*.

SALMON.—Where does the salmon go when he is in the sea? You may catch him in salt water as he is going up to the rivers. But where does he spend the rest of his time during the six months or so he passes in the ocean? Was ever one caught out in the far ocean? What does he take a fly for? A trout fly is an imitation; but a salmon fly is like nothing in heaven or earth. Moreover, as far as I know, salmon do not eat real flies. In fact, it is hard to say what salmon do eat in fresh water. When you catch them their stomachs are always empty. Surely a large Nansen fly, all silver twist and golden pheasant feathers, is like nothing a salmon can ever have seen.—*Fishing in Norway*, in the *Fortnightly Review*.