

THE OTTER*.

THE otter is a voracious animal, but fonder of fish than of flesh: He never quits the margins of rivers or of lakes, and often depopulates the fish-ponds. He swims with more ease than the beaver; for the latter has membranes on his hind feet only, and the toes of his fore feet are separate; but the otter has membranes on all his feet. He swims almost as quick as he walks. He never goes to the sea like the beaver; but traverses the fresh waters and rivers to very considerable distances. He often swims

* The otter has six cutting teeth, and two canine, in each jaw; five toes on each foot, each toe connected by a strong membrane. He has short ears, eyes placed near the nose, thick lips, and large whiskers. The whole colour of his body is of a deep brown, except two small spots on each side of the nose, and another below the chin: His legs are short, thick, loosely joined to the body, capable of being brought to a line with the body, and of performing the part of fins: Each toe is connected to the other by a broad strong web. His length is 23 inches, and that of the tail 16; *Pennant's Synops. of Quad.* p. 238.

In Greek, *Enchelys*; in Latin, *Lutra*, *Lytra*, *Lutris*, *Lutris*; in Italian, *Lutro*, *Lutro*, *Lutro*; in Spanish, *Nutria*; in German, *Fischotter*; in Swedish, *Witter*; in Polish, *Wydra*; in French, *Le Lutra*.

Lutra; *Gesner, Hist. Quad.* p. 684. *Icn. Animal. Quad.* p. 85. *Lutra*; *Ray, Synops. Quad.* p. 157. *Klein, Quad.* p. 91.

Musella Lutra, *placitis palmaris nudis*, *cauda corpore dimidio brevior*; *Linn. Syst.* p. 66.

Lutra castanea coloris. *Brissou, Regu. Anim.* p. 277.

under

under the water, and, after remaining pretty long, ascends to the surface for air. Properly speaking, he is not an amphibious animal, or an animal that can live equally in air and in water. He is not formed for continuing in the latter element; for, like other terrestrial creatures, he requires the aid of respiration. When in pursuit of a fish, if he chances to be entangled in a net, he drowns; and we perceive that he has not had time to cut a sufficient quantity of the meshes to effectuate his escape. His teeth resemble those of the martin, but they are proportionally longer and stronger. For want of fishes, crabs, frogs, water rats, or other food, he gnaws the young twigs, and eats the bark of aquatic trees; he likewise eats the young herbage in the spring. He is neither afraid of cold nor of moisture. The female comes in season in winter, brings forth in March, and the litter consists of three or four. Young animals are generally beautiful; but the young otter is not so handsome as the old. A head ill-shaped, ears placed low, eyes small and covered, a lurid aspect, awkward motions, an ignoble and deformed figure, and a kind of mechanical cry which he repeats every moment, seem to indicate a stupid animal. The otter, however, acquires industry with age, sufficient, at least, to carry on a successful war against the fishes, who, both with regard to sentiment and instinct, are much inferior to other animals. But I can hardly allow him to have the

the talents of the beaver, or even the habits ascribed to him, such as that of always ascending the rivers, in order to swim the more easily down the current, when loaded with his prey*; that of sitting up and flooring his house to exclude the water; that of hoarding a store of fishes, in case of a scarcity; and, lastly, that of being easily tamed, of fishing for his master, and even bringing the fish into the kitchen. All I know is, that the otters dig no habitations for themselves; that they take possession of the first hole they find under the roots of poplars or willows, in the cliffs of rocks, and even in piles of floating wood; that they deposit their young on beds made of twigs and herbs; that we find in their habitations, heads and bones of fishes; that they often change their places of abode; that they banish their young at the end of six weeks or two months; that those I attempted to tame endeavoured to bite, though they were only taking milk, and unable to eat fish; that some days after they became more gentle, perhaps because they were weak or sick; that, so far from being easily accustomed to a domestic life, all of them which I attempted to bring up, died young; that the otter is naturally of a savage and cruel disposition; that, when he gets into a fish pond, he is equally destructive as the polecat in a hen-house; that he kills many more fishes than he can eat, and then carries off one in his mouth.

* See Gesner, *Hist. Quad.* p. 685.

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Though the otter does not cast his hair, his skin is browner, and sells dearer in winter than in summer; it makes a very fine fur. His flesh has a disagreeable fishy taste. His retreats exhale a noxious odour, from the remains of putrid fishes; and his own body has a bad smell. The dogs chase the otter spontaneously, and easily apprehend him when at a distance from water, or from his hole. But, when seized, he defends himself, bites the dogs most cruelly, and sometimes with such force as to break their leg-bones, and never quits his hold till death looses his jaws. The beaver, however, which is not a very strong animal, pursues the otters, and permits them not to live upon the banks he possesses.

This species, though not very numerous, is spread over Europe from Sweden to Naples; and we find them even in North America*. They were well known to the Greeks†, and probably extend over all the temperate climates, especially in places which abound with water; for the otter can neither dwell in burning sands, nor in dry deserts. He equally flies barren rivers, and those that are too much frequented. I believe none of them are to be found in very warm countries; for the *jiya* or *cariguelbeju*‡, which is found

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* See le Voyage de la Hontan, tom. ii. p. 38.

† See *Arist. Hist. Animal.* lib. viii. cap. 5.

‡ *Jiya* que et *cariguelbeju* appellatur a Brasiliensibus; *Marg. Hist. Brasil.* p. 234. *Lutra Brasiliensis*; Ray, *Synops. Animal.* Quadrup.

at Cayenne*, and has been named the Brazilian otter, appears to be a different species: Whereas the North American otter resembles the European in every article, except that his fur is blacker and finer than that of the Swedish or Muscovite otter†.

S U P P L E M E N T.

PONTOPPIDAN assures us, that, in Norway, the otters frequent the salt as well as the fresh waters; and that they live among the fragments of rocks, from which the hunters decoy them by imitating their voice, which consist of a low kind of whistle. He adds, that they eat only the fatty parts of fishes; and that a tamed otter, which was fed with milk, brought fish daily to the house‡.

In some notes communicated by M. de la Borde, I find that there are three species of otters in Cayenne; the black, which weighs 40 or 50 pounds; the yellowish, which weighs 20 or

Quadrup. p. 189. *Lutra pollice digiti brevior; Linnaeus, Lutra auri coloris, macula sub gutture flavâ; Brisson. Regn. Animal. p. 278.*

* *Lutra nigricans, caudâ depressoâ et glabrâ; Barrere, Hist. de la France Equinoxiale, p. 155.*

† See le Voyage de la Honan, tom. I. p. 84.

‡ Pontop. Nat. Hist. of Norway.

25 pounds;

25 pounds; and the small grayish kind, which weighs not above three or four pounds. He further remarks, that these animals are very frequent in Guiana, along the rivers and marshes where fishes abound: They sometimes appear in numerous troops, and are so fierce that they cannot be approached. Their bite is cruel, and they defend themselves against the dogs. They litter in holes which they dig in the banks. They are often tamed and brought up in houses. I have remarked, says M. de la Borde, that all the animals of Guiana are easily accustomed to a domestic state, and become even troublesome by their familiarity.

M. Aublit, a learned botanist formerly quoted, and M. Oliver, surgeon to the King, who have long resided in Cayenne, affirm, that there are otters in that country so large, that they weigh 90 or 100 pounds. They live in the great and unfrequented rivers, and their heads often appear above the water. Their cry is heard at great distances; their hair is very soft, but shorter than that of the beaver, and generally of a dark brown colour. They live upon fishes, and eat likewise the grains which fall into the water from the banks of the rivers.

I have added the figure of a small animal sent me from Guiana, under the name of *the small fresh-water otter of Cayenne*, which appears to be the third species mentioned by M. la Borde. It is only seven inches long, from the

the tip of the nose to the extremity of the body. The tail of this small otter, like that of the water-rat, has no hair; its length is six inches seven lines, and five lines thick at the origin, diminishing gradually to the extremity, which is white, though the rest of the tail is brown; and, in place of hair, it is covered with a rough granulated skin, like shagreen; it is flat below and convex above. The whiskers, and the long hairs under the eyes, are about an inch in length. All the under part of the body and head, as well as the fore-part of the fore legs, is white. The top and sides of the head and body are marked with large brownish black spots, and the intervals are of a yellowish gray colour. The black spots correspond on each side of the body. There is a white spot above the eye. The ears are large, and seem to be longer than those of the common otter. The legs are short; the fore-feet have five unconnected toes; there are the same number in the hind-feet, but they are connected with membranes.

Plate LXXI.



OTTER