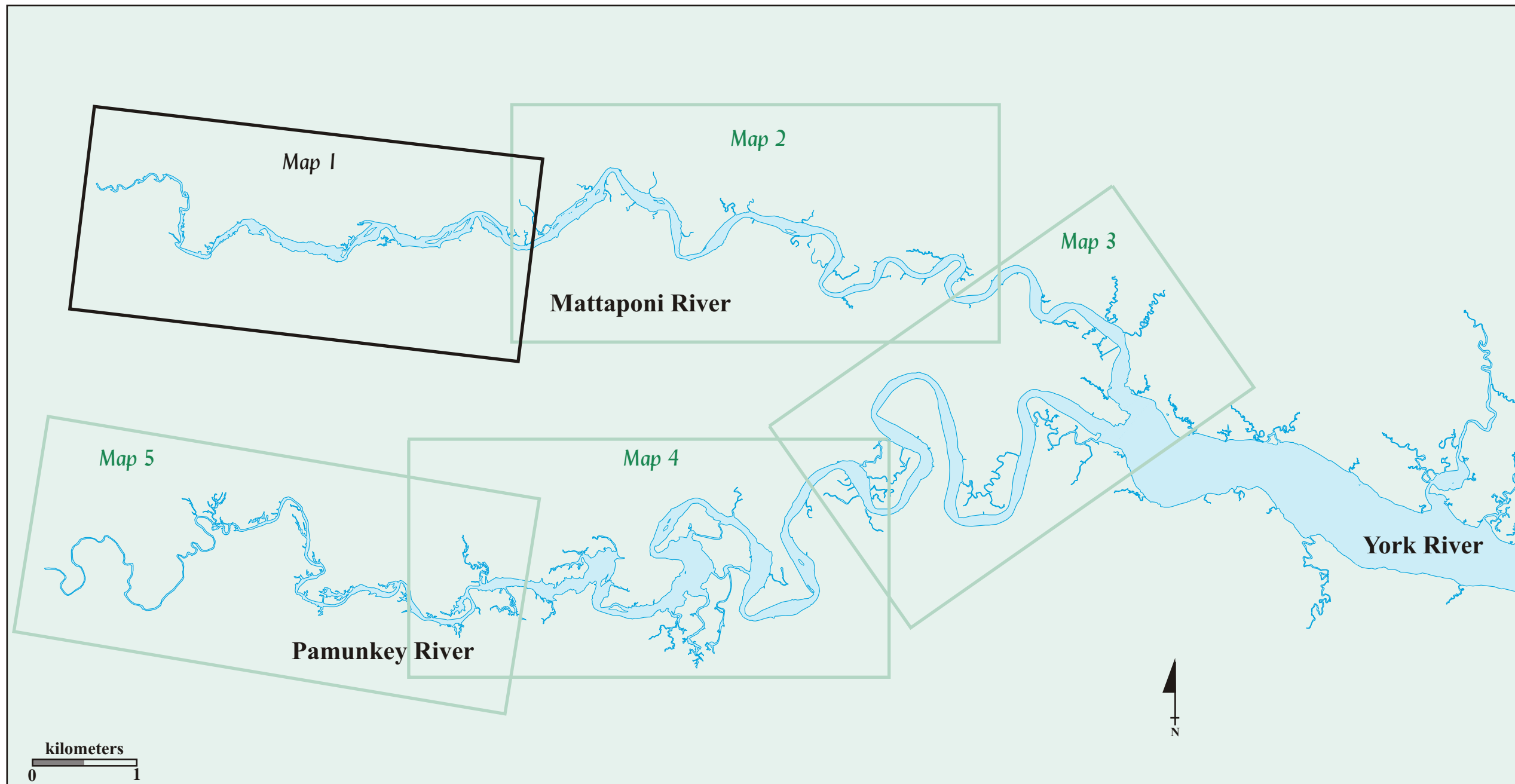


Lower Mattaponi and Pamunkey Rivers

— Map Guide —

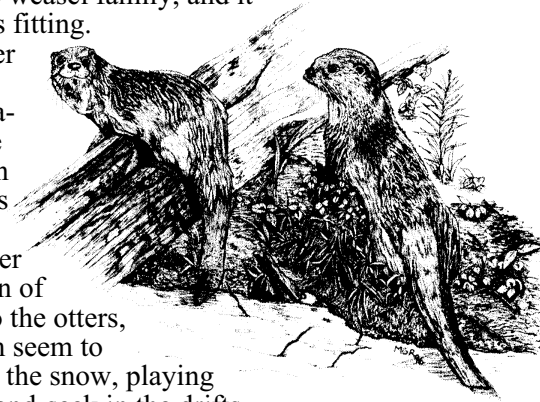


— What You Might Find on this Part of the River —

River Otter (*Lutra canadensis*)

River otters are plentiful on these waters but tricky to spot. Their propensity to frolic and slide has earned them the nickname “playboy” of the weasel family, and it seems fitting.

Winter in the Chesapeake region means just another season of fun to the otters, which seem to enjoy the snow, playing hide-and-seek in the drifts.



Cold temperatures are not a threat to this mammal, which sports a thick coat of brown hair over top of a waterproof underfur. Otters grow to 4-5 feet with a muscular foot-long tail and weigh up to 30 pounds. They live in grass-lined burrows dug in the river bank and feed mostly at night on fish and, farther upriver, freshwater mussels. Otters are able to stay underwater for minutes at a time, using their webbed feet and strong, tapered tail to propel them forward and, like the sea lion, benefit from nose and ear valves that keep out water.

Otter populations have dropped due to heavy trapping. But the otter appears to have adapted to changes in the river systems and developed a tolerance to some pollutants. Its future, therefore, may be brighter than less adaptive species.

White-tailed Deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*)

Perhaps the most conspicuous large mammal you’ll encounter in the watershed is the graceful, lean white-tailed deer. The loss of natural predators and an increase in edge habitat—places where forest meets open field—have contributed to the white-tailed deer’s abundance.

Males, or bucks, are distinguished by their antlers, which fall off after mating season. New antler growth begins again in summer with a velvety cover of tiny blood vessels. This later dries.

Look for a maze of hoof-prints along the riverbank, where deer frequent at night for a cool drink. White-tailed deer graze on forest seedlings and saplings and, at nighttime, venture into open meadows and fields to munch on grasses and field crops.

Great Blue Heron (*Ardea herodias*)

One of the many benefits of paddling through a marsh of the watershed is your proximity to its colorful mascot, the great blue heron. Don’t be surprised if your arrival prompts a cantankerous squawk as the great blue heron lifts its pencil-thin legs into perfect horizontal formation while flying low over the water.



With keen short-range vision and the ability to uncoil its long neck in snakelike fashion, the great blue is a consummate predator in the mud bottom shallows. Great blues feed on young fish that inhabit the dense underwater grasses that define the river’s edges. On the Mattaponi and Pamunkey rivers, their main fare includes shiners, young pickerel, snakes, and frogs. These year-round residents share the rivers of the Chesapeake Bay with eight other visiting heron species.

Buttonbush (*Cephalanthus occidentalis*)

Commonly seen in wetlands, this woody-stemmed shrub produces small nuts favored by wood ducks and other wintering waterfowl. Oblong, shiny leaves reach 3-4 inches and leafstalks are often reddish brown in color. The plant’s name comes from the appearance of its white flowers, which bloom July through September and form a dense button-like head.



River Birch (*Betula nigra*)

This often leaning and forked tree is one of the least exciting trees to behold until you look with a new appreciation, knowing that its tolerance for wet soils affords it a wonderful erosion capability. Against the backdrop of its scaly and irregular trunk bark, river birch leaves move easily in even the slightest breeze, displaying their gray undersides and glossy green topsides. Yellow tiny flowers in spring are followed by elongated brown catkins near the tips of branch twigs. Barred owls favor cavities in birch trees for nesting.

Downy Serviceberry (*Amelanchier canadensis*)

This special small tree is often referred to as shadblow, because it blooms with a profusion of massed white cascading blossoms in very early spring, usually marking the annual spring spawning “run” for blueback herring and shad fish on both rivers. Triggered by the increasingly warmer temperatures and longer periods of daylight, the serviceberry bloom heralds the arrival of spring. The tree’s light gray bark and dull green leaves make it hard to spot from the river, unless you are on the water in early spring, or catch a glimpse of its yellow-red fall blaze, away from the water’s edge and under the larger tree canopy that shelters it.