



NUTRIA

Myocastor coypus

Photo courtesy of Wikipedia.com.

Nutria, also called Coypu, are large, semi-aquatic rodents that were once considered an important resource for the Louisiana fur industry. With the collapse of the fur market in the 1940s, nutria became overabundant and affected thousands of acres of coastal wetland as they grazed on important marsh vegetation.

Photo courtesy of Steve Kendrot, USDA.



Map courtesy of United States Geological Survey.

SPECIES DESCRIPTION

Often mistaken for beavers and muskrats, nutria are furry swimming rodents that can weigh 15-20 lbs and reach 2 ft (0.6 m) long. They are usually dark brown with large heads, short legs, and a stout body that appears hump-backed on land. Their large front teeth can range from yellow to orangish-red on the outer surface. Highly adapted for aquatic ecosystems, nutria have partially-webbed hind feet—along with eyes, ears, and nostrils that are set high on the head allowing them to stay above the waterline while swimming. The best way to tell nutria from beavers or muskrats is to look at their size and tails. Nutria are about one-third the size of an adult beaver, and 5 to 8 times larger than an adult muskrat. Beavers have large, broad, flat tails and muskrats have long narrow tails that whip back and forth when swimming. Nutria have a heavy rat-like tail thinly covered in bristly hairs that trails smoothly behind them when swimming.

NATIVE & INTRODUCED RANGES

Native to South America, nutria were introduced into the United States in 1899 to establish a fur farming industry in California. Although this initial introduction failed, subsequent introductions into Louisiana, Ohio, New Mexico, Washington, Michigan, Oregon, and Utah led to accidental and intentional releases that have allowed this species to spread into 22 states, and become established in at least 16 states. In the United States, the largest nutria populations are located in coastal areas along the Gulf Coast.

BIOLOGY & SPREAD

After the collapse of the fur market, thousands of nutria were released into the wild by ranchers who could no longer afford to feed and house them. In some areas, they were also released by state agencies to control problem plants like water hyacinth (*Eichhornia crassipes*) and alligator weed (*Alternanthera philoxeroides*). Other than annual fur harvesters, alligators are the only significant predator of nutria; however, even in areas with an abundance of alligators, nutria can thrive if habitat conditions are suitable. Nutria are also highly prolific, reaching sexual maturity at six months of age and producing at least two litters of 4-5 young in one year.



Photo courtesy of J. C. Schou, Biopix.

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Photo (top) courtesy of Milos Andera, naturfoto.cz.
Photo (bottom) courtesy of Gustavo Duran, Encyclopedia of Life.

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HABITAT

Nutria have adapted to a wide range of habitats and are usually found living along lakes, marshes, slow-moving streams, and in freshwater, brackish, or saltwater marshlands. They tend to prefer habitats with an abundance of emergent vegetation and small trees, shrubs, and other succulent vegetation along the banks. In cities, nutria can be found under buildings, in overgrown lots, on golf courses, and in storm drains.



Photo of nutria footprint in mud courtesy of Steve Kendrot, USDA.

IMPACTS

Threat to Biodiversity

High populations of nutria can severely damage wetland ecosystems and native plant species. They feed predominantly on the base of plant stems, but dig for roots and rhizomes in the winter. This grazing can strip large patches of marsh, destroying the plants that hold together the marsh soils that sustain coastlines and support the survival of native species. In some cases, these resources are permanently damaged. The destruction of these marshlands also increases the vulnerability of adjacent upland sites to erosion and flooding during storms.

Economic Costs

The burrowing behavior of nutria can weaken the foundation of important infrastructure such as reservoir dams, buildings, road beds, and flood control levees that protect low-lying areas. Grazing has damaged important economical crops such as sugarcane, rice, corn, and various kinds of fruits and vegetables, resulting in significant economic losses for farmers. Anglers and local industries also suffer when the degradation of wetland spawning areas results in decreased catches of shrimp, crab, and fish.

Health Risks

Nutria can threaten public health and safety because they serve as hosts for several pathogens and parasites such as tuberculosis, septicemia, blood flukes, and tapeworms, which can contaminate drinking water supplies and swimming areas.

PREVENTION & CONTROL

It is best to control nutria where they are concentrated and most active. While trapping, poisoning (currently zinc phosphide is the only chemical approved for nutria), and shooting are controversial, they offer direct methods of control. Indirect methods include exclosures like fences or walls, rodent repellents, seedling protection, and aromatic plantings. Intensive trapping is useful for removing nutria from localized areas, and when applied strategically, can eliminate populations across large areas provided the risk of reinvasion is manageable. However, due to low fur prices, recreational or commercial harvest is generally insufficient to exert population control.



Photo courtesy of Wikipedia.com.

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