



Muskrat

Ondatra zibethicus

The muskrat is a small mammal that flourishes in North Carolina. It is highly adaptable and establishes colonies in riverbanks and marshes. Muskrats are coveted by humans and other predators such as mink. Aside from the fact that they eat crops, muskrats are virtually harmless to humans and can entertain anyone who stops and takes the time to appreciate them.

History and Status

The muskrat is a North American native that dwells primarily in Canada and the United States. Because of the value of its fur, it was introduced in Europe and Asia in the early 1900s. It is not found in areas of sandy soil because its den material must pack easily and loose sand does not pack well. In general it survives well and is not in danger of extinction. Essentially an amphibious mammal, the muskrat spends its life in ponds and rivers, feeding on aquatic vegetation and on crops such as soybeans and corn.

Muskrats are abundant in North Carolina and can be legally trapped during open season. Despite the relatively low value of pelts, muskrats are the most commonly trapped and sold furbearer in North Carolina. Population densities are high in many areas and muskrats are more easily trapped than most other furbearers.

Description

When muskrat young (kits) are born, they are blind, hair-



less and merely a few inches long. Over time they are weaned and mature into large, thick, dark-furred rodents. There are two basic color variations—brown (70 percent) and black (30 percent). Jet black and blond varieties do exist but both are rare.

An excellent swimmer, this large rodent spends much of its life in water. It has a long naked, laterally compressed tail and webbed hind feet which, for swimming purposes, are much larger than the front feet. Its ears are short and its fur is thick and soft. It looks like a small beaver with a thin tail. Adult muskrats range in size from 10 to 14 inches and weigh about 2 pounds.

Habitat and Habits

Muskrats require a permanent supply of water. They occupy a variety of wetland habitats including fresh- and saltwater marshes, canals, ditches, ponds, lakes, rivers and other streams. Primarily plant eaters, muskrats feed on the roots, shoots and leaves of various aquatic plant species. They sometimes build platforms of vegetation for feeding activities in ponds and marshes. Mussels and clams are also a common food source.

Piles of shells from freshwater mussels will show where muskrats feed frequently, usually on rocks and along the banks of rivers and streams. Other food items are bark, acorns, frogs and small fish. In agricultural areas, feeding muskrats can damage soybeans and corn. Feeding activities are primarily nocturnal, but muskrats are often seen during daylight hours.

Muskrats often dig burrows into the banks of streams, lakes, canals or impoundments. Large haystack-shaped houses up to 8 feet across and 5 feet high may be constructed in marshes on top of roots and mud. Dens usually have several chambers and several escape exits. Den sites may house one or several animals.

The social unit consists of a breeding pair of adults and juveniles that occupy a breeding territory. Young muskrats may remain in their parents' home range until the following spring



Range Map:

Found statewide.

before dispersing to establish their own territories.

Muskrat populations seem to be cyclic and are subject to a variety of mortality factors. Drought, habitat destruction from overpopulation and diseases can decimate a muskrat population. Predators such as raccoons and mink will raid dens to prey on young muskrats. Mink, foxes, bobcats, alligators, hawks and other animals prey on adult muskrats. Mortality is high and the average life span is short. The ability to reproduce prolifically enables muskrats to sustain high population levels or bounce back from die-offs.

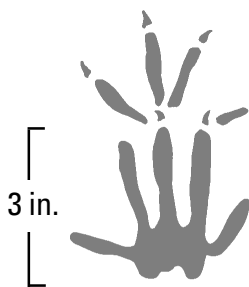
Range and Distribution

Muskrats are one of the most prolific furbearers in North America. They occupy much of the available wetland habitat in the United States and Canada, but are absent from Florida and rare in some Southern states. Muskrats are common in most of the river systems of North Carolina. They are rare in coastal areas of southeastern North Carolina.

Muskrats live in marshy, freshwater areas with a home range of less than a mile. They are colonial animals and their living environments are affected by availability of food and water.

People Interactions

The muskrat is a very shy, non-aggressive animal that avoids humans. Because of its potential for damaging man-made earthen dikes, dams and irrigation systems, there is a need to control its population. Licensed trappers take a variable number of muskrats each year. In addition, many others crossing highways are hit and killed by cars.



References

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Credits

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MUSKRAT

Classification

Class: Mammalia
Order: Rodentia

Average Size

Length: 10-14 inches
Weight: 2 lbs.

Food

Cattails, grass, soybeans, leaves, roots, corn, some clams and mussels

Mating

Muskrats are mostly promiscuous. Sexually mature in 8 to 10 months. Can breed at any time of the year.

Young

Kits. Gestation period of 29 or 30 days. Average litter size is 4. Adults produce an average of 2 to 3 litters a year in North Carolina. Kits are naked and blind at birth, weighing less than an ounce apiece.

Life Expectancy

3 to 5 years