



Nutria – Nature’s Lawnmowers

What are they?

Nutria are in the same rodent family as muskrats. Like their cousins—muskrats, beavers, and hamsters, and others—nutria have two pairs of incisors (or sharp, flat front teeth) that they use for gnawing. These teeth grow continuously through their lives.

Some people call this animal a coypu or coypus. This is a form of the word *koypu*, a South American word for these animals.

Nutria are not native to the Chesapeake region. Because of this, they are considered invasive. Invasive animals and plants are not normally part of the food web in a particular area. They compete for limited resources and usually drive out native animals, taking their place in the food web.



Photo Source: Christine Ustis, fws.gov

What do they look like?

Nutria look a lot like muskrats. However, nutria are much larger. Adults average 16 pounds, and can weigh as much as 20 pounds. Four of the five toes on their back feet are webbed, helping them swim easily.

Their large front teeth (incisors) are orange. Their tails are generally hairless, just like muskrat's tails. Nutrias have two kinds of hair. Their outer coat is coarse and brownish in color. Their undercoat is much softer. It is usually dark gray. Their chins and muzzles (the part of their heads near their nose and mouth) are white.

Where can you find them?

There were no nutrias in the Chesapeake Bay region until 1943. People brought them in to the area, hoping to raise them to sell their fur and meat. People have observed them in every county on Maryland's Eastern Shore, on the Delmarva peninsula, Maryland's western shore of the Bay, and in the Potomac and Patuxent Rivers. In one county alone (Dorchester) the number of nutrias has grown from less than 150 in 1968 to an estimated 50,000 animals today.

Nutria like to live near slowly-moving water. You can find them in fresh and saltwater marshes and other wetland areas, and near the banks of rivers, streams, and ponds.

How do they behave?

Nutrias have two important characteristics that are threatening the wetland areas throughout the Chesapeake region.

First of all, they have enormous appetites. They are mainly herbivores, meaning that they eat only plants. Their favorite foods are stems, roots, and rhizomes of bulrushes, cattails, and smooth cordgrass.

They have special teeth, and hands with five fingers to help them dig up and snatch out the roots and rhizomes. Nutria tend to “over-harvest”, or collect more food than they need to take to their dens. They eat up to 25% of their body weight each day. That means that if a nutria weighs 20 pounds, it could eat up to 5 pounds of food each day. All of that eating puts an incredible strain on available food sources. Nutria can cause “eat outs” of vegetation, leaving big empty patches in the marsh land. They start in the middle of a large clump of plants and move outward. This destroys large areas of marsh plants very quickly.

Chesapeake Bay region wetland areas are already disappearing. The nutria's destructive habits put even more pressure on these resources.

Secondly, nutria reproduce quickly. They can have up to three litters per year, with up to thirteen young per litter. That's up to 39 young per year, per female. When nutria are only 4 – 6 months old, they are able to have children. So their population increases quickly.

Nutria and muskrats share many of the same characteristics. Both like to be around water. Both are excellent swimmers and can stay underwater for long periods of time. Because they are so similar, the these two kinds of animals often compete for the same resources. The nutria are more aggressive, though, and often win in the battle for the food and shelter both kinds of animals need.



What do they eat?

Nutria don't just graze (or eat some parts and leave others) on wetland plants. They eat the leaves, stems, seeds, and roots and rhizomes. They literally mow down large areas of the marshes, leaving nothing behind.

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What eats them?

Because nutria are a non-native species, they have no natural enemies that prey on them.



Creature Feature

Maryland is taking action to protect native habitats and animals from the nutria. A team of federal, state, and private organizations is working on the Maryland Nutria Project. After a period of studying the problem, the group swung into action, planning to rid the Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge and surrounding areas of nutria. In November 2004, the group announced that all the nutria in this area had been completely eliminated.