

BEST PRACTICES



Nutria: Threat to Native Wetlands

Nutria (*Myocastor coypus*) are large, semi aquatic rodents native to southern South America. Nutria have invaded many parts the United States and Canada causing millions of dollars in damage to valuable wetland habitat and resources. During the 1930s nutria were introduced throughout North America primarily for the fur industry. Between the years 1930-1950, there were 600 nutria farms in Washington and Oregon. They have also been used to control unwanted aquatic vegetation. As with many exotic species farms, once prices collapsed and farming became uneconomical, the rodents were released. Nutria, like other invasive species are very adaptable and highly prolific. They quickly established themselves throughout North America.



Nutria in Capitol Lake.

Nutria belong to the taxonomic order of Rodentia or rodents, which are characterized by a single pair of continuous growing front teeth that must be kept short by gnawing. Nutria are smaller than beavers but larger than muskrats and most closely related to porcupines (they are not rats!). Their bodies are 17-25 inches with a long 10-16 inch sparsely haired tail. Their average weight is 12 pounds. The nutria's front legs are very efficient for digging and burrowing, causing considerable wetland damage.

Nutria are voracious consumers of aquatic plants and roots consuming approximately 25% of their body weight daily. They also wreak havoc on agricultural fields and gardens eating only 10% of what they harvest.

Nutria often use aquatic vegetation to build feeding platforms which they construct in shallow water. Besides feeding, platforms are used for grooming, resting and birthing.

Nutria are prolific breeders. They have as many as three litters per year with an average of five young per litter, but they may have as many as 13 young in one litter. Young are born fully furred, and within a week they are eating wetland vegetation. In 1938, 20 individual nutria were introduced into Louisiana and within 20 years, the nutria population exceeded 20 million animals! By 1962, nutria had replaced the native muskrat as the leading furbearer in Louisiana (Marshdog.com).

Control measures and preventing damage: Nutria are not climbers so when designed correctly, fences and other barriers can be effective in excluding them. Nutria are diggers so all barriers need to be buried at least one foot into the ground to be effective. Water level manipulations can also be used to force nutria to more desirable areas. Eradication of nutria is through trapping and lethal control. In Washington State nutria are classified as a Prohibited Aquatic Animal Species (WAC 220-12-090). Due to their classification, all live trapped animals should be euthanized and not returned to the "wild". For more information on living with wildlife visit <https://wdfw.wa.gov/living/nutria.html>

Creative Consumerism: In response to the invasive species issue, there is a world-wide trend of utilizing and/or consuming invasive species. The prominent group Invasivore.org and the popular book by Jackson Landers *Eating Aliens* are two references worth checking out. As a way to save local wetlands, companies such as *Righteous Fur* sells fashionable clothing made of nutria fur and *Marsh Dog* produces a popular, all natural dog treats made from nutria.

Source: Stream Team News, Winter 2014