Eradication team prepares for the final push

Wildlife specialists with the USDA Wildlife Services program's Nutria Eradication Team have spent the last two years searching high and low for nutria throughout the Delmarva Peninsula where this South American rodent has invaded and destroyed countless acres of life sustaining coastal wetlands.

Charged by the US Fish and Wildlife Service with eradicating nutria, the USDA team spent 8 years developing trapping strategies to eliminate this destructive invasive species. In the process, more than 13,500 nutria were removed from nearly 160,000 acres of marshes. Today Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge is virtually nutria free. Fishing Bay sees only the occasional invaders that are quickly removed once detected. We haven't found nutria in the Lower Choptank River in nearly two years and a small group removed from the headwaters of the Choptank in Marydel, DE during the winter of 2012 appears to have been an isolated outbreak.

In early 2010 the program received a series of recommendations from an international panel of invasive species experts. Having started at the core of the nutria infestation at Blackwater, the team was chasing an expanding population from behind. The panel of experts recommended defining the boundaries of the population on Delmarva first, and then devising a strategy to surround and suppress the remaining populations.

USDA Wildlife specialists inspect a nutria damaged marsh before (left) and after (right) nutria removal in Somerset County, Maryland.

It took two years to cover thousands of miles of coastal waterways and countless acres of marsh from the C&D canal to Exmore, Virginia. Reports solicited from trappers, hunters, landowners and outdoor enthusiasts were investigated and intensive surveys were conducted throughout Delmarva .

The team discovered widespread nutria in the Wicomico and Manokin Rivers, isolated pockets in the Annamessex River and evidence of a recent invasion in the Pocomoke River. Exhaustive searches along Virginia's Bayside Accomack county revealed no evidence of established populations. The eradication team has concluded that remaining nutria populations on Delmarva are confined to Maryland's Lower Shore in Wicomico and Somerset counties.

Now the team is gearing up to apply the very successful methods used at Blackwater to the remaining populations on the Eastern Shore, eliminating this destructive non-native, protecting and restoring vital wetland habitats.

Beginning in the Pocomoke River, the team will work northward, watershed by watershed, advancing to the next river system, as nutria are removed. Mailings to advise landowners have been sent and many landowners have returned agreements allowing the team to access their property. Individual landowners will be contacted by project staff to secure permission as they move into new areas.

Depending on landowner cooperation and distribution of nutria, it could take two years to remove the remaining populations and several more to verify that the effort was successful. Mop up efforts to remove individuals that escape the initial trapping effort can take as long or longer due to the difficulty of detecting nutria at very low densities.

Meanwhile, the project's oversight committee will be working to see passage of the Nutria Eradication and Control act in Congress, and secure funding to keep the eradication team working as their area of operations expands.

Research and development has been an important component of the eradication effort. As populations are driven to super low densities, finding ways to reliably detect nutria has taken on increasing importance. Trapping nutria is relatively easy, particularly where they are abundant, but in the final stages of eradication, or in a colonizing population, detecting rare individuals and enticing them to detection devices or traps is a significant challenge.

Even where nutria are known to exist, testing our survey methods has shown that because of tidal fluctuations, seasonal changes in nutria behavior and vegetation, surveys must be repeated several times in order to ensure detection.

5000 acres of Blackwater's once expansive marshes have been reduced to sunken mudflats visible only at the lowest of winter tides.

Outdoor enthusiasts may have noticed the hundreds of nutria detection platforms (pictured below) the team has placed throughout the Mid-Shore region to aid in finding nutria. These floating wooden platforms serve as artificial resting sites for swimming nutria to climb aboard. Staff relied on the presence of scat to indicate a visit by nutria. However, trail cameras placed on platforms proved that visiting nutria don't always defecate! Undeterred, Wildlife Specialists Daniel Dawson and K.C. Kerr developed an innovative new hair snare designed to capture and retain hair samples left by visiting nutria. This new technique has dramatically improved the effectiveness of our platforms.

CBNEP Nutria Detection Platform

Attractants are another research priority. Finding a scent based lure that can draw nutria to detection devices or traps would improve efficiency in the field. Various recipes are being field tested.

Landowners play an important role in the Chesapeake Bay Nutria Eradication Project. More than half of the nutria captured to date, and most of the remaining populations occur on private lands. With written permission from private landowners, the eradication team can help protect these treasured landscapes from nutria damage. Project staff will be reaching out by mail and in person to landowners of wetland habitats along the rivers and shores of the Chesapeake. For informational brochures, interested parties can contact us at:

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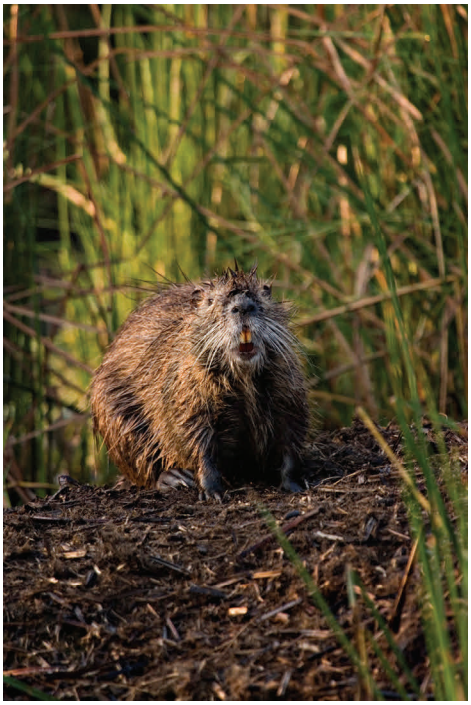

For more information about nutria and the Chesapeake Bay Nutria Eradication Project, visit:

http://www.fws.gov/chesapeakenutriaproject/

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