

Nutria (*Myocaster coypus*)



What is it?

The nutria is a large semi-aquatic rodent that lives in colonies along rivers, lakes, and wetlands. They tunnel along the streams, canals, or ditches, and through wetlands. In warmer months, they live in dense vegetation and move into large burrows when temperatures get colder. Nutria are mostly voracious vegetarians who can consume large amounts of riparian and wetland plants. They also feed on small invertebrates such as insects and snails. The gnarly nutria is capable of fast movement overland, but is more at home in the water. The nose and mouth have valves which seal out water which in turn allows this rotten rodent to swim long distances underwater. Like most rodents, the nutria reproduces prolifically. Females often have two or three litters every year, each consisting of five to seven young. These youngsters mature quickly and leave their mother after only a couple of months.

FACT: One breeding pair of nutria can result in a nutria population of more than 16,000 individuals after only three years.

What does it look like?

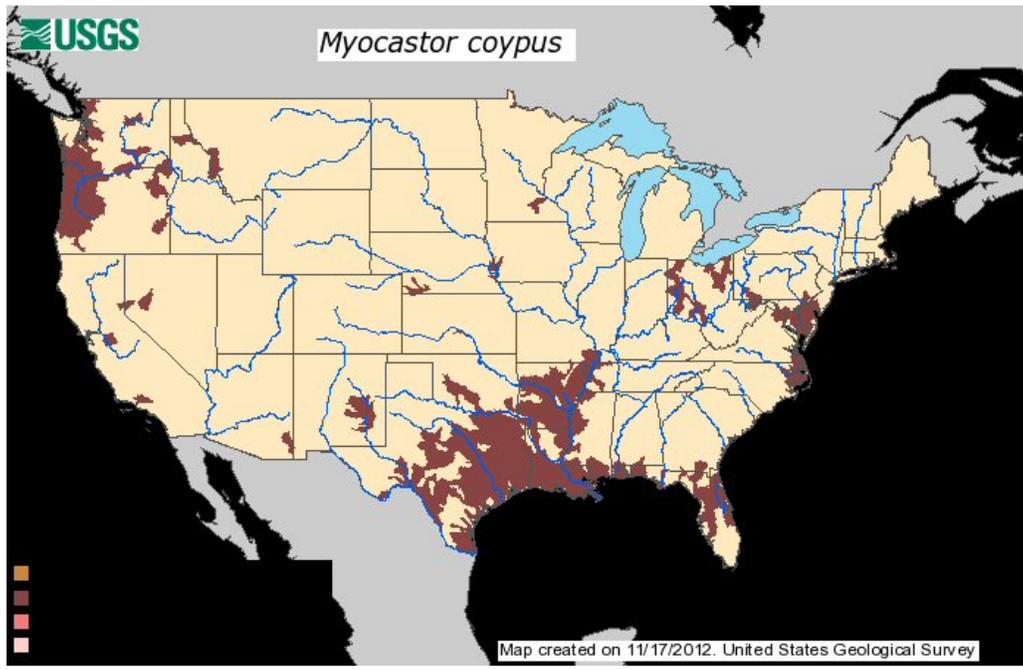


At first glance, you may mistake this naughty nuisance for a beaver, which is larger, or a muskrat, which is smaller. The round, slightly haired tail, 13 to 16 inches in length is easily distinguishable from the flat horizontal tail of the beaver or the flat vertical tail of the muskrat. The nutria's small ears and eyes are set high on its head. Long, white whiskers and a patch of lighter fur (tan to orange) at the base of their ears also set this animal apart from the solid dark brown heads of the beaver and muskrat. Like beavers, nutria have large incisors that are orange to orange-red on the surface. Nutria average around 10 to 20 pounds and measure 34 to 42 inches in length. With small forelegs and large hindlegs, nutria drag their chests and appear to be hunched over while moving on land. Four of the five digits on the hind feet are webbed.

FACT: The scientific name *Myocastor* is derived from two Greek words (*mys*, for mouse, and *kastor*, for beaver) that translate into mouse beaver.

Where is it from & where is it now?

Nutria are native to South America. They have now populated parts of North America, Asia, Africa, and Europe. In the U.S., populations are mostly found in coastal states.



How did it get here?

Nutria were first brought to the U.S. between 1899 and 1930 for the purpose of establishing a fur farm industry. Some of the nutria escaped from these farms on their own, while others were released intentionally by unscrupulous farmers when it became apparent that there was no real market for the fur. Hence, nutria quickly became established in a paradise filled with great habitat and few predators.

FACT: In most of the world, the nutria is known as a coypu and nutria is the name of the animal's fur.

What are its impacts?

Don't be fooled by the cute coypu; this animal can wreak havoc in our waterways in more ways than one. Nutria burrows and tunnels can damage the integrity of flood control levees, man-made canals and ditches, and streambanks resulting in significant erosion and instability. Nutria are known for feeding heavily on plant roots, which changes soil structure and transforms wetlands into open water habitat. Loss of marsh habitat impacts native species such as waterfowl and muskrats. The impact does not end there. In the U.S., nutria are responsible for damage to agricultural crops such as rice, sugarcane, corn, and alfalfa, just to name a few. Their love of wetland vegetation and invertebrates results in less food and resources for native species such as muskrat. Depletion of native plants often leads to colonization of non-native, invasive plants such as reed canarygrass which provides little value to native species. Lastly, this raunchy rodent can serve as a host for



some nasty pathogens including tuberculosis and septicemia which can be transmitted to people, pets, and livestock. They also carry parasites such as tapeworm, liver flukes, and nematodes. These organisms, found in nutria feces and urine can contaminate swimming areas and drinking water supplies. *YUCK!*

FACT: Nutria can consume up to 25% of their weight daily.

What is being done about it?

In both Oregon and Washington, the nutria is classified as a Prohibited Species (OR) or Prohibited Aquatic Animal Species (WA). In WA, it is unlawful to transport nutria in the state without a permit. All live trapped animals must be humanely terminated and not be returned to the wild. In OR, live nutria may not be imported, possessed, sold, purchased, exchanged, or transported in the state. Nutria are classified as an Unprotected Mammal and can be trapped year round. Aside from trapping, other management options include controlling water levels and installing walls or bulkheads along the sides of canals or streams to prevent nutria from burrowing.

FACT: Although most nutria burrow only 6 to 10 feet, there are reports of tunnels up to 150 feet in length.

What can YOU do?

Never feed ducks, geese, or other wildlife. It will attract non-native species such as nutria.