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WILD NUTRIA IN U. S. INCREASING IN ECONOMIC IMPORTANCE

The nutria, as a fur-bearer, is some day expected to rival the muskrat as a source of fur and revenue in Southern states like Louisiana, says the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Louisiana conservation officials have estimated that in ten years nutria may be worth \$15,000,000 a year to the state's fur trappers. This would be equivalent to the value of muskrat and other furs in some of Louisiana's more prosperous years.

Nutria were imported to the U. S. from South America as early as 1899, but a considerable quantity of them were brought in during the 1930s for experimental fur-farming. The large muskrat-like rodents did not do too well in captivity, however, and occasionally fur farmers released the animals in nearby marshes to fend for themselves. Other nutrias escaped by accident.

Before long, nutrias were well entrenched in Louisiana, New Mexico and the State of Washington. The Louisiana nutrias have multiplied and overflowed to eastern Texas, Mississippi and Alabama. A few nutrias, probably escapees, have been reported in Michigan, Ohio, Iowa, and western Canada.

While Louisiana fur-trappers and wildlife officials look upon the nutria as a welcome resident and economic asset — with catches gradually increasing from 900 to 27,000 in five years — conservationists in nearby states question whether the nutria migration will be an unmixed blessing. The large rodents dig into irrigation canals, levees, and small dams to some extent. Nutrias have also been known to raid farmers' corn, vegetables, rice or alfalfa crops. Fish and Wildlife Service specialists point out, however, that the high price paid on the market for nutria pelts — an average of \$3.50 each — will encourage trappers to keep the populations of the animal under control.

The nutria, also called the "coypu", weighs about ten times the muskrat's average of two and a half to three pounds. Consequently, it gives a much larger pelt. The South American immigrant resembles the muskrat in color, tail and general conformation, but its wiry mustache gives its head a boxy appearance.

A prolific creature, the nutria has a family of five to ten young an average of two times a year. Before another year is past, the young nutria produce families of their own. The animal is also interesting in that it has mammary glands along the sides of the back and the young can nurse while floating beside the mother in the water.

Waterfowl and muskrats live in the same marshes with nutrias without crowding or unpleasantness. The nutria eats coarser marsh vegetation — spurned by most creatures — and thus occupies a habitat-niche not used by other animals.

The Fish and Wildlife Service is conducting investigations concerning the life and habits of the nutria, and its relationships to other creatures and to land-use by man. Frank G. Ashbrook and his associates in the Service's Wild Fur-Animal Investigations section have cooperated with a commercial animal trap company and state officials in making experimental designs for a nutria-fur stretcher. First models were tested this year in the marshes and have been perfected for use by trappers next year. The new stretchers will enable trappers to prepare pelts with greater ease and make them more salable.

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