



Muskrat

Ondatra zibethica



RANGE: common throughout south Louisiana, as far north as Avoyelles Parish; throughout most of North America, except for a few western states, South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida

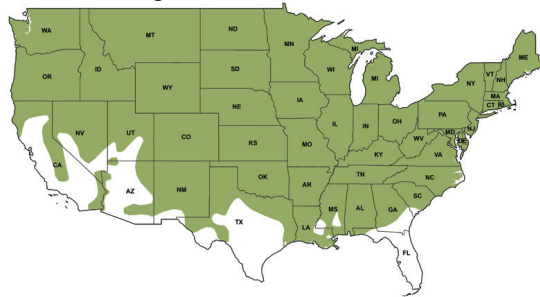


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Diet, Habitat & Behavior

Musk rats eat primarily live vegetation, along with some fish, mussels, insects and snails. They are somewhat sociable with other muskrats, but when populations become dense, they will fight to the death. They can hold their breath underwater for 10-12 minutes. Musk rats live in coastal marshes, bayous and lakes. They build houses out of vegetation and mud or burrows into levees and stream banks to construct dens. Uncontrolled muskrat populations cause damage to irrigation canals, dams and dikes, by digging around these structures. They also cause "eat-outs," by feeding on roots of vegetation. It may take 15-20 years for the habitat to return to its original capacity to serve wildlife species.

Anatomy

Musk rats have a vertically flat tail. The average adult weight is 2 pounds, with total length averaging 22 inches (10 of which is the tail). They have partially webbed hind feet, sharp claws on the front feet used for digging stems and roots and musk glands on the lower abdomen of males. Musk rats are prey to mink, fox, coyotes, hawks and owls.

Reproduction

Musk rats mate year-round; their highest degree of sexual activity occurs in November and March, the lowest in July and August. They have five to six litters per year, with three to four young per litter. They reach sexual maturity at 6 to 8 weeks of age.



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