Nutria

Myocastor Coypus

Nutria (Myocastor Coypus) are large semi-aquatic rodents indigenous to South America. The original range included Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Chile, Paraguay, and Uruguay. In the 1930s nutria were imported into Louisiana for the fur farming industry and were released, either intentionally or accidentally into the Louisana coastal marshes. Nutria are herbivores and feed particularly on wetland plants. Nutria have caused extensive damage to Louisiana's coastal wetlands due to their feeding activity.

Anatomy

Nutria are smaller than a beaver but larger than a muskrat; unlike beavers or muskrats, however, it has a round, slightly haired tail. The forelegs are small compared with its body size. The forepaws, have five toes; four are clawed and the fifth is reduced in size. The digits are used to groom and to excavate roots, rhizomes, and burrows, and are used in feeding. The hindfoot consists of four webbed, strongly clawed toes and one unwebbed toe. The hind legs are large compared with the forelegs; consequently, when moving on land, the nutria's chest drags on the ground and its back appears hunched. Although appearing awkward, the nutria is capable of fast overland travel for considerable distances. The ears are small and the eyes are set high on the head. The nose and mouth are valvular (i.e., can be closed to prevent entry of water), and nutria are capable of swimming long distances underwater. When pursed while underwater, nutria can see and will take evasive action to avoid capture. Males are slightly larger then females. Nutria weigh an average of 12.0 pounds (5.4 kg).

Reproduction

Nutria breed year round and are extremely prolific. Males reach sexual maturity between 4 and 9 months, whereas, females reach sexual maturity between 3 and 9 months. Sexual maturity may vary with habitat quality. With a gestation period of only 130 days, in one year, an adult nutria can produce two litters and be pregnant for a third. The number of young in a litter ranges from 1-13 with an average of 4.5 young. Females can breed within a day of having a litter. Litter size can vary with age of female, habitat quality and time of year. The young nutria at birth are fully furred and the eyes are open. Newborn nutria feed on vegetation within hours and will nurse for 7-8 weeks. Females have four pairs of mammary glands that are located on the side of the body, rather than on the belly. Presumably, this positioning of the mammary glands allow the young to nurse with their nose above the water's surface while the mother is floating.

Behavior & Diet

Nutria are well adapted for movement on land, however, are more at home in the water. In the coastal marshes they are often seen moving about leisurely in the daytime, but their period of greatest feeding activity is just prior to sunrise and after sunset. Nutria are strict vegetarians, consuming their food both on land and water, where they shove aquatic plants to their mouths with their forepaws. These animals consume approximately 25% of their weight daily. Nutria predominately feed on the base of plant stems and dig for roots and rhizomes in the winter. They often construct circular platforms of compacted, coarse emergent vegetation, which they use for feeding, birthing, resting and grooming. Nutria may also construct burrows in levees, dikes and embankments.

HISTORY

1930s

Imported from fur farms, nutria were released, either intentionally or accidentally, in the Louisiana marshes in the 1930s, and soon after, feral populations were established near the Gulf Coast. Nutria continued to expand their range from there as they were trapped and transplanted into marshes from Port Arthur, Texas to the Mississippi River in 1941. Later that year, a hurricane further dispersed nutria populations in southeast Texas and southwest Louisiana.

Late 1940s

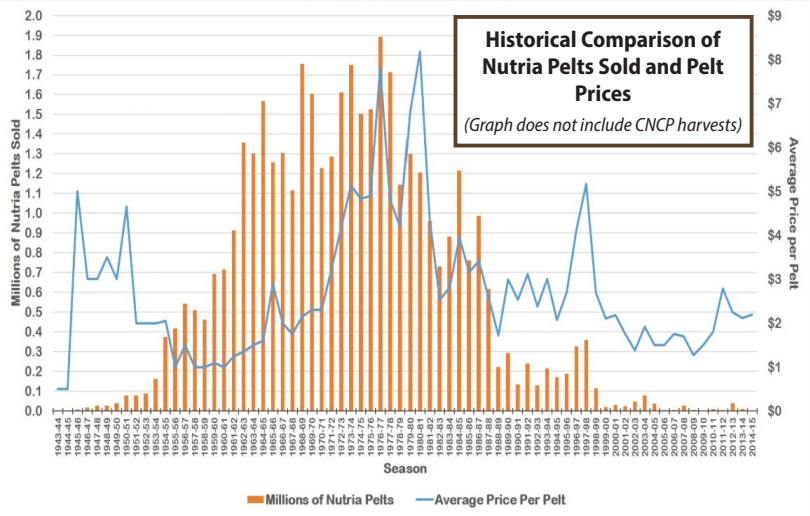
In the late 1940s, nutria were promoted as biological agents for controlling aquatic weeds, primarily water hyacinth, and were transplanted throughout southeastern Louisiana. Rapid population growth followed for several years thereafter. Annual pelt harvest records and damage reports were the primary source of information on population dynamics at that time.

Mid-1950s

At this time, reports started coming in describing the damage done to marshes, rice and sugarcane fields, and levee systems, as nutria populations soared to 20 million animals. Biologists described areas where nutria had completely denuded natural levees at the mouth of the Mississippi River. The marsh had been weakened by severe over-grazing, and in 1957, Hurricane Audrey hit southwestern Louisiana. Its storm surge further weakened the marsh as a huge wave of seawater pushed thousands of nutria inland, accelerating the rate at which the animals spread. Soon after, reports of agricultural damage increased, and in 1958 nutria were taken off the list of protected wildlife.

1960s to 1980s

As the state promoted nutria fur as a natural resource, efforts to manage nutria as a pest began to compete with the growing fur industry. In 1965, the nutria was returned to the protected wildlife list. From 1962 to 1982, 1.3 million nutria were harvested annually for their fur from the coastal marshes. Reports of nutria damage declined substantially, and periodic severe weather helped to reduce populations.



Mid-1980s

The international fur market began to shrink during the mid-1980s, and, as a result, harvest levels substantially declined. Reports of significant nutria damage to the wetlands began coming from coastal land managers during the 1987-88 harvest season, which had been dramatically less productive than previous years due to the declining fur trade and stock market crash of 1987. Aerial surveys in 1988 confirmed damage was occurring, particularly of the southeastern marshes.

1990s

In the 1990-91 harvest season, only 134,000 nutria were harvested. Aerial wetland damage surveys began in earnest in 1993 and were conducted again in 1995, 1996, 1998-2002. Survey results clearly show that nutria damage in recent years is concentrated in the Deltaic Plain in southeastern Louisiana. This indicates high nutria populations that are exceeding the local carrying capacity.

2000

In 2000, the U.S. Congress passed an appropriation to address Brown Marsh Dieback and to provide funds for a number of research studies on nutria. The Coastal Wetlands Planning, Protection, and Restoration Act, also known as the Breaux Act, has provided grant funding for coastal restoration and conservation. In 2002, a final report on Nutria Control Methods was completed by Genesis Laboratories under contract by the Louisiana Department of Natural Resources. After reviewing a number of possible methods to reduce nutria, the report concludes that the incentive payment program is the best option for coast-wide control. The report confirms the method advocated by the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries. This program was put in place when the trapping season opened in November 2002.

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Resources: *www.wlf.louisiana.gov/page/nutria*

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