LOUISIANA
Conservationist
Published by the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries in the interest of conservation of Louisiana natural resources.

In This Issue

Nutria

BY GREG LINSCOMBE AND NOEL KINLER

Greg Linscombe and Noel Kinler are biologists with LDWF's Fur and Refuge Division, based at New Iberia.

The nutria or coypu (*Mycocastor coypus*) is a large semi-aquatic rodent. The term "nutria" actually refers to the pelt of the animal and means "otter" in Spanish. Nutria resemble a large, robust rat (average weight 12 pounds), smaller than a beaver but larger than a muskrat. Unlike either the beaver or the muskrat, nutria have a round, almost hairless tail. The front legs are small compared with body size. Four of the five toes of the forepaws are clawed and are used for digging roots, feeding and grooming. The

hind legs are much larger, with four of the five toes webbed. When moving on land, the nutria's chest drags on the ground and its back appears hunched. The nose and mouth are valvular (can be closed to prevent entry of water), and nutria are capable of swimming long distances underwater.

This rodent is a valued furbearer and characterized by dense grayish underfur and long glossy guard hairs varying in color from dark brown to yellowish brown.

Nutria are indigenous to South America (Argentina, Chile, Bolivia and Uruguay). Beginning in the late 1800s and early 1900s, nutria were moved to many parts of the world for captive breeding because of their fur value and perceived ability to control undesirable aquatic vegetation.

The first nutria were imported into the United States in 1899 to establish a fur farm at Elizabeth Lake, California. During the 1930s nutria ranches were established in Louisiana, Michigan, New Mexico, Ohio, Oregon, Utah and Washington. These ranches failed during World War II because of poor pelt prices and poor reproductive success.

The Gulf Coast nutria population originated in Louisiana in 1937 when naturalist E. A. McIlhenny imported 13 nutria to be held in captivity at Avery Island in Iberia Parish. Numerous escapes occurred in subsequent years; the largest group (approximately 150) escaped during a hurricane in 1940. The population grew rapidly and spread coastwide. Feral nutria populations are now present in 15 states.

In Louisiana nutria are known to breed year-round, and females reach sexual maturity at 4 to 5 months if not delayed by poor habitat quality. Parturition dates are influenced by hurricanes, freezes, droughts and extreme hot weather. Peaks in birth vary by habitat type.

Gestation averages 131 days, and the average litter size in Louisiana is four or five. Nutria are born fully furred with their eyes open and capable of swimming and eating green vegetation within 24 hours of birth.

Nutria are herbivores and occur throughout Louisiana; however, they are most abundant in the marshes and swamps of coastal Louisiana. Highest populations are found in freshwater marshes comprised of maidencane, bulltongue, spikerush and alligatorweed. Other habitats that support large numbers of nutria include intermediate and brackish marshes comprised of wiregrass, three-cornered grass, hogcane and roseau cane as well as cypress-tupelo swamp.

Management of nutria in Louisiana consists of harvest regulations, water-level control and marsh burning. The nutria is the most important furbearer in the state in terms of numbers produced and value. Since the early 1960s, the nutria has represented over 60 percent of the state's entire fur harvest. This is a substantial contribution since Louisiana leads the nation in wild fur production and has harvested fur valued at over $26 million in one year.

Nutria can be harvested by trapping and shooting during the open trapping season. In fact, they must be harvested annually to prevent high density populations from overutilizing marsh vegetation and creating an "eatout." An "eatout" is an area where all vegetation, sometimes including roots and rhizomes, are removed by feeding activity. This marsh damage may result in increased marsh loss and coastal erosion.

The objective of water-level management in brackish marsh is to moderate tidal surge and stabilize water levels. This is done by fixed crest weirs, variable crest culverts, levees and bulkheads. Ditching of marshes provides for trapper access and allows for marsh drainage to promote vegetation growth after an "eatout" occurs.

Due to the vegetative diversity in freshwater marshes, water-level management is of lesser importance in those areas. Avoidance of floods and droughts and attempts to stabilize water levels are conducive to productive nutria populations.

Marsh burning in brackish marsh is conducted annually to reduce vegetative roughage and promote the growth of three-cornered grass, which is the most important food source for nutria, muskrat, and blue and snow geese.

In recent years, the nutria harvest has been reduced due to poor pelt prices. Consequently, overpopulation of nutria in southeastern coastal marshes has resulted in marsh damage, increased erosion and marsh loss.

The key to avoiding these overpopulations is to provide sufficient economic incentive to trappers to harvest nutria. The Louisiana Fur and Alligator Advisory Council has established this as a priority and is working toward development of new markets for Louisiana nutria. □

The nutria or coypu is a large semi-aquatic rodent. It resembles a large, robust rat, smaller than a beaver but larger than a muskrat.