



# Nutria

## North Carolina Wildlife Profiles



Photo by Ken Taylor

## Nutria

(*Myocastor coypus*)

The nutria is a large, semi-aquatic rodent that is native to South America. It was introduced into the United States in the late 1800s for its fur and to control noxious plant species. In the process of devouring weeds and other unwanted vegetation, the nutria destroyed native aquatic vegetation, crops and wetland areas. In the Gulf Coast states where they are most abundant, they have caused severe, often permanent, damage to coastal marshes and other wetlands. Currently, the nutria is found in 22 states, including North Carolina, where it is considered a furbearer species with regulated hunting and trapping seasons.

### Description

The nutria is larger than a muskrat but smaller than a beaver. It is distinguishable from muskrats and beavers by its large head, stout body that appears hump-backed on land, white whiskers on both sides of its nose, and long, rat-like tail. It has small eyes and ears set high on their head and large, dark-orange protruding incisors. The fore legs are small and the front feet have five un-webbed toes. The hind legs are much larger and four of the five clawed toes on each hind foot are webbed. The fur varies from yellowish brown to dark brown. The chin is often white and the belly is pale gray.

### History and Status

Nutrias were introduced to Hatteras Island in 1941 and appeared near Garysburg in Northampton County by the early 1950s. They apparently spread into Currituck Sound after being released in Virginia and have expanded their range to the south and west since then. There is no closed trapping season on nutria east of I-77. West of I-77, where they have not been documented, they can be trapped during the regulated trapping seasons. There is no closed hunting season on nutria. For more information on nutria, visit [www.ncwildlife.org/nutria](http://www.ncwildlife.org/nutria).

### Habitats & Habits

Nutrias live in aquatic habitats along the banks of marshes, swamps, drainage canals, ditches, rivers, and impoundments in some areas of eastern North Carolina. Large floating platforms of vegetation as much as 5-6 feet across are often constructed for feeding activities. High populations of nutrias are capable of converting marsh habitat into open water.

Dens may be burrows in the bank or nest-like platforms of dead vegetation, which are also used for feeding, loafing, and grooming. Bank dens have a 7-10 inch

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### Range and Distribution

Nutrias are common in some of the coastal swamps and marshes of eastern North Carolina. They are absent from the mountains, foothills, and most of the piedmont.

### Range Expansion Map 1990-2020



- Range 1990
- Range Expansion 1990-2000
- Range Expansion 2000-2005
- Range Expansion 2005-2010
- Range Expansion 2010-2020
- Unoccupied Range

opening at water level and a tunnel extending up into several chambers. Nest chambers are lined with grass and straw. Nutrias are primarily nocturnal and crepuscular but may feed in daylight hours, especially when the weather is cold. Most activity occurs at dusk.

Nutrias are excellent swimmers but can also be swift and agile on land. They often float on the surface of the water with only the eyes and ears visible. They can remain submerged for several minutes before surfacing for air. Valves in their nostrils and mouths seal out water when submerged to swim or feed. A group of nutrias often provides a chorus of pig-like grunts at dusk. Nutrias sometimes live in colonies of 15-20 individuals that centers around a clan of related females. They often exhibit group behavior that includes grooming, sunning, and feeding activities. Home ranges are generally small. Nutria have poor eyesight and sense danger by hearing.

### Human Interactions

The nutria is an exotic species native to South America. North Carolina has not experienced the same levels of habitat destruction seen in the Chesapeake Bay and further south in Louisiana. This is most likely due to more frequent severe winter weather, which tends to cause extensive mortality in nutria since they are not adapted to live in colder climates.

### For More Information

[www.aphis.usda.gov/publications/wildlife\\_damage/fsc-nutria-invasive-rodent.pdf](http://www.aphis.usda.gov/publications/wildlife_damage/fsc-nutria-invasive-rodent.pdf)

[pcwd.info/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/1994Nutria.pdf](http://pcwd.info/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/1994Nutria.pdf)

[www.fws.gov/columbiariver/ANS/factsheets/nutria.pdf](http://www.fws.gov/columbiariver/ANS/factsheets/nutria.pdf)

[www.fws.gov/chesapeakenutriaproject](http://www.fws.gov/chesapeakenutriaproject)



The nutria is distinguishable from the beaver and the muskrat by its long rat-like tail.



(Photo by USFWS)

### Wild Facts

#### Classification

Class: Mammalia

Order: Rodentia

#### Average Size

Length: Body length is ~37 in., with a tail length ranging between 26 and 56 in.

Weight: 5 to 25 pounds. Males are generally larger than females.

#### Food

Nutrias are primarily herbaceous and feed on the roots and rhizomes of aquatic marsh plants. Cord grasses, cattails, three square and pickerel weed are some favorites. Nutrias may also feed on mussels, crustaceans, and agricultural crops such as rice, corn and cabbage.

#### Breeding/Young

Nutria breed year-round and are prolific breeders. They can reach sexual maturity at 4 months old and often have two litters per year. Average gestation is about 130 days and litter size ranges from one to 13 young, with an average of five. Within 24 hours of birth, the young are capable of swimming and eating. Weaning takes place at about 2 weeks of age.

#### Life Expectancy

Up to 15 to 20 years in captivity but typically less than three in the wild.