

THE FUTURE STATUS OF THE NUTRIA, FUR-BEARING RODENT, IN ILLINOIS

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Persons are being encouraged to introduce into Illinois the South American rodent known as the nutria, *Myocastor coypus*. Lucrative gains have been promised by breeders' associations to those raising these animals on fur farms. Before extensive introductions are made, however, it is wise to review the facts concerning the nutria and to predict its future value as a fur-bearing rodent in Illinois.

The nutria is native from Paraguay to the Straits of Magellan. It is closely related to the guinea pig and porcupine and is only distantly related to the muskrat. An aquatic rodent weighing as much as 25 to 35 pounds, it resembles a beaver, but has a round, not paddle-shaped, naked tail. The mammary glands are located on the sides rather than on the abdomen. Nutrias are docile and less wary of humans than muskrats or beavers. In many places where nutrias have been liberated, they are active during the daytime; in other places they are active only at night.

Under ideal conditions, nutrias feed almost entirely an aquatic vegetation along the edges of marshes and ponds, or out in these bodies of water. They prefer cattails, reeds, and various other types of aquatic vegetation. Their nests are usually made among reeds and sedges and are built by piling together the cut twigs of these plants, forming a somewhat bird-like nest. Sometimes

the animals burrow into banks. The burrows are short and from eight to nine inches in diameter. Nutrias will not eat the algae or water mosses found in many of our ponds and swamps. They are said to clear out this type of "vegetation" but such does not seem to be the case.

Under favorable conditions these animals will breed the year around and each adult female may produce two or three litters each year with an average of five young in a litter. The young are precocial and care for themselves effectively a few hours after birth. They weigh about one-half pound at birth, grow rapidly, and reach sexual maturity in less than six months. Under favorable conditions, nutrias are as prolific as rabbits!

Captive nutrias on fur-farms would not compete with the native muskrats. However, wherever nutrias have been introduced as farm animals, some almost invariably have escaped because of ineffective penning, flood damage to the pens, or other factors. Once free, they could readily establish themselves in nature in many parts of the United States. Their food habits, breeding habits, and general behavior place such nutrias in direct competition with our native muskrat. It seems inevitable that they will usurp much of the food of the muskrat and by their prolificacy outnumber them in a short time.

The nutria has been introduced in

many parts of the world, including most states in the United States, Europe, and Russia. Perhaps its most extensive introduction and fur-farming has taken place in the southern United States. In many places, nutrias have been released in open bodies of water, such as small lakes and ponds, where it was felt that they could naturally feed upon the vegetation choking the lakes and prove beneficial both by clearing out the vegetation and as a source of income from their fur. In some cases, they have soon eaten all shore vegetation. Nutrias, released in one lake in Texas, cleaned away all marginal vegetation, then turned to larger items such as small trees, and most recently have been swimming out into the lake and feeding on the duck-blinds, the supports of which they have completely cut, and caused the blinds to sink.

In many parts of the southern United States, nutrias have become such pests that numerous requests are being made for practical methods of eliminating them. There is no practical method known for removing them. In some states, such as Texas, they can be killed legally at any time and by any method. Nevertheless, they still continue to increase and remain a pest.

Nutrias have not only failed to remove moss from clogged ponds, but their burrowing activities have weakened earthen dams and levies. Their extensive utilization of shore vegetation has forced the native muskrats out of some areas and destroyed valuable waterfowl habitat.

It seems apparent that what has happened in Texas and other southern states with regard to nutrias in

the wild may very well happen in Illinois. Although it might be the intention to keep all nutrias in fenced fur farms, it is predictable that circumstances will enable nutrias to escape. It seems probable that in Illinois they would establish themselves along drainage ditches and around ponds in such a fashion that they would be a real menace to the native muskrat and waterfowl. They would compete with other mammals living in marshy areas, including the swamp rabbit, and in general become so numerous as to be a threat to many kinds of wildlife.

Promoters have claimed that the fur of the nutria is far more valuable, in dollars and cents, than that of the muskrat. They maintain that a nutria skin will bring up to \$75 and ask as much as \$1000 for a pair of breeding nutrias. Actually, nutria pelts are selling for from 25 cents to \$2.50 (average about \$1.25) on the 1958 fur-market. Furthermore, fur-buyers are hesitant to take nutria pelts even at these low prices. It is unlikely that nutria fur will bring appreciably greater prices in the next few years. The muskrat in Illinois was bringing about \$2.50 in 1958, or about twice the average amount for the nutria. The muskrat tends to maintain a satisfactory balance in its habitat and should continue to produce over many years, whereas the introduced nutria all too often "eats itself out of house and home". The end result may be that first the nutria will drive the muskrat out and then drive itself out by destroying all available food.

The National Better Business Bureau, the National Fur News, and

many other organizations have cautioned prospective investors to check the economic aspects of nutria-farming.

Because of the low economic gains from nutria-farming and because of the probable undesirable effects of introducing another non-native

mammal which may replace a valuable fur-bearer, it is advisable to exercise careful controls over any importations and plantings of nutria within the state of Illinois. It would seem most desirable to forbid any importations, plantings, and fur-farming of nutria within Illinois.