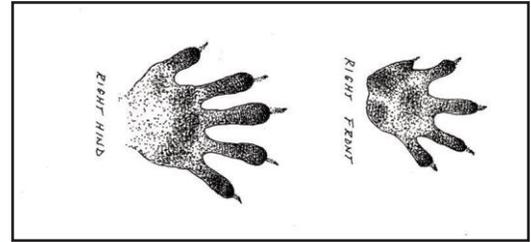
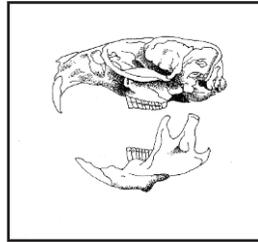


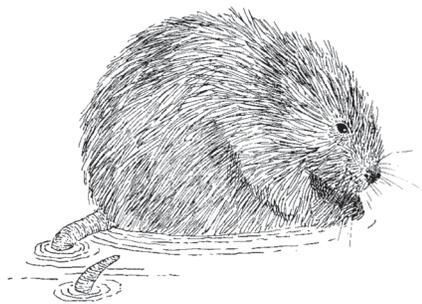


Muskrat
Family Muridae
Ondatra zibethica



Musk rats are large rodents with rat-like tails. They can also produce a musky, strong-smelling liquid. That's how they get their name. Muskrats are at home in the water—true aquatic mammals found mostly in wetlands, marshes, ponds and along streams and rivers—wherever the water is still or slow-moving.

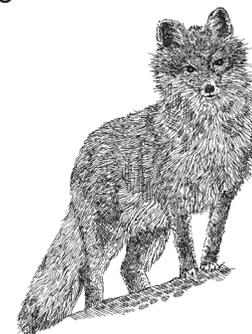
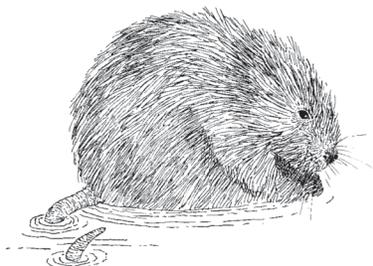
There is some similarity between muskrats and their much bigger cousins the beaver, but if you saw them side by side you would have no trouble telling which is which. An adult beaver weighs in at a whopping 40–60 pounds, but an adult muskrat is merely 2–3 pounds. Muskrats are about 22–25 inches in length, including the tail. That tail is flat like a beaver tail, but it is vertical or rudder-shaped as opposed to the beaver's large, flat tail. And the muskrat tail is used as a rudder as it paddles through the water. On land, the tail helps to balance them when they stand on their hind feet. Both the beaver (below right) and muskrat (below left) have scaly, mostly hairless tails.



The muskrat's front feet are small compared to its hind feet. The broad hind feet are partially webbed to help propel them through water, and the front feet are adapted for digging.

Their ears and eyes are small and their coats range from chestnut to black. **Well-designed to deal with cold water,** the muskrat's dense underfur covered by long, dark brown guard hairs provides excellent insulation in winter. **Musk rats do not hibernate** and need to keep feeding throughout the winter, even on a frozen pond.

Who is the number one furbearer in the United States? The mink, the muskrat or the fox? Believe it or not, it is the muskrat. A furbearer is the name traditionally given to an animal that has been hunted or trapped primarily for its fur or pelt.



Musk rats do not dam streams in order to build their lodges. Their lodges are built on ponds using cattail stalks or other vegetation, held together with mud and weeds. Muskrat lodges can be 10 feet across and three feet above water. Inside is a single living chamber with several tunnels. If they don't build a lodge, they may burrow into stream banks or earthen dikes, which can create leaks. Musk rats enter the lodge from underwater but live within the lodge above the surface.

When muskrats feed in dense marshland, they open up channels through the vegetation. This muskrat-created change in habitat is a tremendous benefit to waterfowl and other aquatic wildlife, like red-winged blackbirds and pickerel frogs (below). It offers nesting sites and access to food or shelter these creatures may not have been able to reach before the muskrats moved into the area. In this way, **a muskrat can be considered a keystone species.**



During winter, muskrats dig up the roots of aquatic plants from the bottom of the pond. They'll also feed on twigs, buds and barks of wetland trees, such as willows, cottonwoods, ash or box elders. **In warm weather,** they love to eat all parts of the cattails, bullrushes, water lilies, pickerelweed, and more. Just about any plant growing in or near water, including crops might be eaten. Even though muskrats are herbivores, they will sometimes dine on crayfish, mussels and the carrion of fish, frogs and other muskrats!

Musk rats have a stable population because they produce large litters throughout the year. They may have as many as four litters during the year if warm weather lasts. Musk rats leave a trail of musk scent to attract potential mates. Five to eight young are born blind and furless with each litter and are weaned and fully furred within a month.

Like many rodents who repeatedly produce large litters, **musk rats provide food for a wide variety of predators.** But the number one predator of muskrats is the mink. If a local muskrat population does get too crowded, muskrats will not breed, which control their own population.



A Simple Review of Muskrats

Some people call **muskrats** marsh hares or musk beavers. They are **semi-aquatic rodents found along our state's streams, rivers and marshlands**. They get their name from the musky odor they use to attract a mate and from their scaly, rat-like tail. Muskrats have a soft, glossy pelt. They are sometimes trapped, and their pelts are sold for money.

Muskrats are mostly nocturnal, but it is not impossible to see one during the day. Mostly they stay close to their lodges or burrows. Similar to a beaver, but much smaller, muskrats have brownish fur and partially-webbed-hind feet. But their tail is narrow, scaly and flat, not big and wide like a beaver's tail. Muskrats are half the length of a beaver, and they weigh much, much less than a beaver. A beaver may weigh 60 pounds. Most muskrats weigh about three pounds.

Excellent swimmers thanks to their rudder-like tail and unique respiratory system. Muskrats can hold their breath for up to 15 minutes to find food or escape predators like mink, foxes, great-horned owls or hawks. But snapping turtles may prey on them while in the water.



A big pile of plant material that looks like it's floating on a pond or marsh is probably a muskrat lodge. Muskrats build their lodges in autumn in water deep enough to not freeze to the bottom. They enter the lodge underwater, then surface into a dry room inside that sits above water level. Each lodge has several rooms and tunnels. In winter several muskrats may live in one room, huddling together for warmth. At the top of the central room is an air hole that allows in fresh air. **Muskrats are active all winter, even searching for food under ice.**

Muskrats are herbivores. They have big incisors for snipping off plants that they swim back to their lodge, often storing the food for a later meal. Like the beaver, muskrats have special lips that close behind their incisors, allowing them to gnaw on plant foods even while swimming.

Muskrats produce up to four litters a year. Because they have so many young, some muskrats are out of the lodge and on their own at only two months of age. Because there are so many muskrats, a lot of predators hunt along ponds and marshes.

It's pretty easy to spot a muskrat lodge, but it's harder to actually see a muskrat. They might be active on cloudy days. **When they swim, muskrats create a V-shaped ripple in the water.** You can also identify their tracks in the soft mud around a pond. **Look for webbed feet and the mark of a long, skinny tail dragging between the tracks.**