

# Nutria

*Myocastor coypus*

**Order:** Rodentia

**Family:** Myocastoridae

**Description:** Nutria are large semi-aquatic rodents, smaller than a beaver but larger than a muskrat. Unlike beavers or muskrats, they have round, scaly tails with some hair. The muzzle and chin are white and the ears and eyes are small. The incisors are large and dark orange, protruding beyond the lips. The four inner toes of the hind feet are webbed. Nutrias may be 3 feet long and weigh up to 35 pounds.

**Range and Habitat:** Nutria are native to South America. Their original range includes Argentina, Chile, Bolivia, Uruguay, Paraguay and southern Brazil, where they are called *coypu*. After escaping from captivity in the U.S. and elsewhere, they now inhabit a much greater area. Nutria were first imported into the United States between 1899 and 1930 in an attempt to establish a fur farm industry. Many of the fur farms failed in the late 1940s because fur prices fell and nutria did not reproduce well in captivity. Many nutria were released into the wild. Nutria are now reported throughout the Chesapeake Bay system and in every Gulf state, including Florida. They have caused widespread damage to wetlands in Texas, Louisiana and the Chesapeake.

Nutria spend their lives in or near water, especially marshes and ponds.

**Wild Diet:** Favorite foods include rushes, reeds, cattails, arrowhead and sawgrass. They will also eat sugarcane.

**Reproduction:** Nutria breed year-round and are extremely prolific. Males reach sexual maturity at

4-9 months, while females are sexually mature at 3-9 months. With a gestation period of only 130 days, in one year, an adult nutria can produce two litters and be pregnant with a third! The number of young in a litter ranges from 1-13. Females can breed within a day of having a litter. At birth, young nutria are fully furred and the eyes are open. Newborn nutria feed on vegetation within hours, and they will nurse for 7-8 weeks.

### **Special Features:**

- **Life Span** – A nutria’s lifespan is about 6 years.
- **Behavior** – Nutria feed on the roots of plants, severely damaging wetlands by digging underneath and overturning plants to feed on the root mat. Nutria are excellent swimmers, and typically swim with their food to a feeding platform for eating.
- **Habitat Use** – Although they are generally found in freshwater habitats, some populations inhabit brackish and salt waters.
- **Nutritious Nutria?** – Although Louisiana officials have attempted to market nutria as a restaurant entrée, it hasn’t yet caught on as a popular dinner item.