

Muskrat



Overview:

Muskrats are large freshwater rodents that look very much like a beaver, but are actually related to mice and rats. This is where they get the second part of their name, because their tail looks like that of a rat. The first part of their name comes from the strong-smelling odor or musk, that the muskrat produces during mating season and to mark its territory. Musk rats have had many names given to them over the years: marsh rabbit, mud cat, mud beaver, and the Algonquin Indian tribe called it musquash.

Musk rats have two coats of hair. The thick fur undercoat keeps the muskrats warm in winter, and the outer coat is made up of long, shiny waterproof hairs. The muskrat's fur is a dark brown that gets lighter around its throat. The tail is long, flattened, and nearly hairless, making it a perfect rudder for swimming.

Females normally produce one to five litters per year, with each litter containing four to seven young. That's up to 35 young a year! Gestation lasts 22 to 39 days and young are born throughout the year. The females will often breed while still nursing. Young are born three to four weeks after breeding and are born hairless. Only two weeks after birth the young muskrats have fur and are able to swim. They are able to take care of themselves within a month and are on their own.

Swimming is what muskrats do best. They can swim up to speeds of two to three miles per hour. It would take an Olympic swimmer to catch up with them! Musk rats spend much of their time sleeping during the day and slip into the water in the evening. They dive underwater for food, or in search of vegetation for their lodges.

Like beavers, muskrats also build lodges. However, their lodges consist of more aquatic vegetation than sticks. Sometimes they even make their own feeding stations to protect themselves from predators while they are eating. They typically eat aquatic vegetation, a few terrestrial plants, clams, frogs, crayfish, and fish. Their private dining rooms are made from weeds and plants and are built on top of floating rafts of reeds. The muskrat lodges usually have one nesting chamber and several underwater entrances for quick escape routes.