



# WILDLIFE NOTES

## Muskrat

What's in a name? This "musky-odored" rodent uses two musk glands at the base of the tail to communicate with others of its kind. Muskrats (*Ondatra zibethicus*) will liberally cover strategic lodging areas with their musky scent, either to intimidate intruders such as the neighborhood weasel, or to advertise the female's presence and availability. Both sexes have the musk glands. The muskrat is of the family Cricetidae and is the largest member of the North American "New World" mice. Frequently thought of as a relative of the beaver, it is actually a closer relative to voles, lemmings and deer mice.

### Physical Characteristics

The muskrat has some interesting physical adaptations that enable it to occupy the watery niche of wetlands and riparian areas. This small three pound aquatic rodent can stay beneath the water's surface for up to 17 minutes! One might think a muskrat is soaked to the skin. Not so! Its waterproof underhair lies above an insulating layer of air, so water never touches the skin. As an added benefit, the layer of air keeps the animal buoyant. Musk-

rat is a durable and widely used fur. It sometimes goes by the more glamorous name of "Hudson Seal" fur.

The muskrat smells and hears superbly but sees poorly. Its hind feet are almost

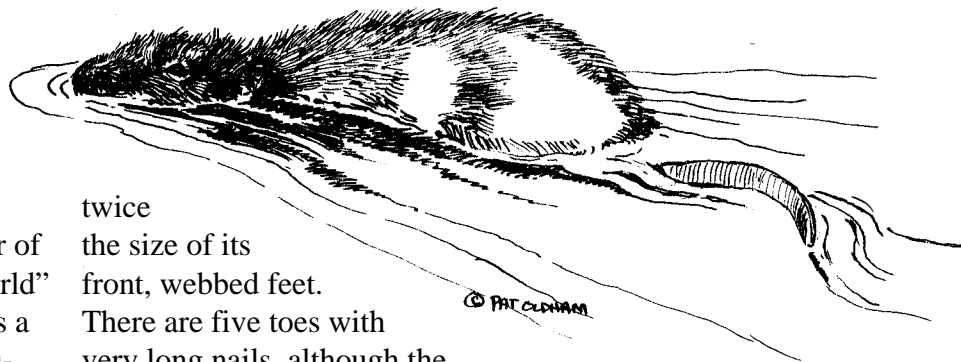
twice the size of its front, webbed feet. There are five toes with very long nails, although the fifth toe on the front foot is so small it does not register in a track. The hind foot has stiff hairs surrounding the toes to help support the animal in soft mud and aids in swimming as well. Active all year, muskrat tracks and tail drag marks can be found in snow. Muskrat scat can be found on rocks and logs above the waterline. The scat is composed of little pellets stuck together, although sometimes the pellets are separate.

### Natural History

The muskrat is a common riparian mammal found in New Mexico,

where four confirmed sub-species of Muskrat find niches.

The Muskrat builds lodges of pond grasses or bank burrows with entrances usually 6 inches



below the water's surface. Several muskrats may share a lodge and together increase the temperature inside a lodge to as much as 20 degrees C above outside temperature. The construction of lodges occurs from late August until late October. Building on a platform of mud, the muskrat uses small aquatic plants such as cattails, sedges, weeds, leaves, sticks and more mud until the structure is about 2 feet high. Then the muskrat excavates from inside and hollows out an area to fit a family. This interior is usually 3 ft. to 5 ft in diameter

with wall thickness from 3 inches to 12 inches. In this “muskrat rooming house” each family member may construct its own sleeping quarters. There will typically be one to two plunge holes leading to tunnels that connect the lodge to the open water.

Muskrat feeding stations look similar to small lodges. These are called “pushups” since the muskrat pushes up mud and aquatic plants through holes in the ice. This debris will freeze but it keeps the hole in the ice open! Ever watchful of predators, the muskrat will defend its burrow and pond, sometimes to the death, against a mink, weasel or fox. They are so territorial, they have been observed chasing away dabbling ducks.

Musk rats are primarily herbivorous but they will eat carrion, fish, crayfish and molluscs.

## Status

Musk rats in New Mexico are apparently secure and are commonly found along marshes and drainages of the Rio Grande, San Juan and Pecos Rivers. They also occur in most of the National Wildlife Refuges (NWR), for example the Bosque del Apache NWR, the Bitter Lake NWR, and Maxwell NWR as well as most mountain lakes in the state usually up to 8,000 feet elevation. As a furbearer, the muskrat is harvested from several counties in NM, including Valencia, San Juan and Socorro.

## References:

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