



USFWS

# Muskrat

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## *Ondatra zibethicus*

A variety of animals live in Alabama's lakes, streams, and wetlands. Shorebirds, waterfowl, snakes, turtles, and a number of mammals call this habitat home.

Several species of aquatic rodents dwell in aquatic habitats. The most common is the beaver. Another lesser-known species is Alabama's "little beaver" — the muskrat.

The name muskrat is derived from the musky odor this small mammal emits. They are also known as "marsh hares." Trappers across the country simply term these animals "rats."

### **Description**

Typically the size of a small rabbit (2 pounds), the muskrat's rich brown fur consists of an outer layer of guard hairs and a thick soft layer of under fur. This under coat acts as insulation, which protects the animal from extreme cold.

This animal also possesses numerous specialized features. Unlike a beaver that has a flattened tail, the muskrat's tail is laterally flattened. Usually 8 to 10 inches in length, this tail can actually be used as a rudder or be used to propel the animal through water.

Additionally, muskrats have specially adapted eyes, nose, and a respiratory

system that allows them to remain underwater for up to 15 minutes. This is particularly useful when searching for food or avoiding predators.

### **Diet**

Primarily vegetarians, plant materials make up about 95 percent of the muskrat's diet. Favorite foods are cattails, bulrush, smartweed, duck potato, horse-tail, water lily, sedges, young willow sprouts and pickerel weed. They will eat almost any type of aquatic vegetation, including the bulbs, roots, tubers, stems and leaves of various wetland plants. If vegetative food sources are low, muskrats will also eat small animals such as freshwater mussels, frogs, crayfish, fish and small turtles.

### **Habitat and Distribution**

Like beavers, muskrats live in dens located in association with local wetlands. Muskrat dens are of two types: the bank den and the hut. Huts are composed of vegetation that can be as high as 3 feet and as wide as 4 feet across. A casual observer of this structure may think it is

a beaver lodge. One of the easiest methods used to determine the difference is to notice what construction materials are used. Beavers utilize woody vegetation (sticks, etc.) for lodge construction while muskrats primarily use herbaceous vegetation for hut construction. Bank dens are usually located in streams or ponds where water levels are fairly deep and the banks are steep.

Muskrat burrowing can have negative consequences. It can lead to the creation of hazardous terrain for local livestock. It can also be responsible for dam failure or cave-in associated with ponds and lakes.

Muskrats may be found statewide but seem to be much more common in north Alabama, especially in the Tennessee Valley.

### **Trapping**

In Alabama, muskrats may be trapped in season. Trapping season in Alabama runs from November 15 to February 20. Traditionally, muskrat pelts have been utilized in the garment industry as coats, vests, and even mittens. This species is a valuable renewable resource that can be a joy to watch in outdoor Alabama. [GA](#)

### **Facts About Muskrats**

- ▶ The muskrat's name comes from the two scent glands that are found near its tail. They give off a strong musky odor that the muskrat uses to mark its territory.
- ▶ While under water, muskrats can close off their ears to keep the water out.
- ▶ Muskrats are most active at near dawn and dusk and at night.
- ▶ Like most rodents, muskrats are prolific breeders. Females can have two to three litters a year of six to eight young each.
- ▶ Muskrats can cause severe damage to levee systems because of their burrowing activities.