muskrat

Ondatra zibethicus

Kingdom:	Animalia
Division/Phylum:	Chordata - vertebrates
Class:	Mammalia
Order:	Rodentia
Family:	Muridae

Features

The muskrat is a large vole (16 to 25 inches long, including and eight- to 11-inch tail) that has long, red-brown fur with some black hairs scattered throughout. Its belly is gray. The long, thick, hairless tail is flattened side-to-side. The back feet are elongated. The ears are small. The front teeth are broad and orange.

Natural History

The muskrat lives in rivers, ponds, lakes, streams, ditches, or marshes. It eats cattails, sweet clovers, bulrushes, pickerelweed, smartweeds, American lotus, water lilies, sedges, and other aquatic plants. It may eat crayfish, mussels, and other aquatic animals occasionally. It is mainly nocturnal. It makes a high pitch squeak and “chatters.” It can swim forward and backward. Only the nose and ears remain above water when it swims. It tends to be aggressive and fight with other muskrats. It may build a house of vegetation in shallow water. Its entrance is below the water line but the majority of the house, including the nest, is above the water line. Other muskrats build a burrow into the bank of a stream or pond as a place to live and rear young. Most entrances to these bank burrows are below the water level. The burrow may be nearly 25 feet long. Several muskrats may use the same den. The name “muskrat” comes from the musky odor produced by these animals during the breeding season. Dried musk historically was used in the manufacture of perfume. Breeding may occur from spring through fall and each female generally produces two litters. Litter size varies from two to eight. Young are born helpless but develop rapidly. They are able to swim at three weeks and live on their own at four weeks.

Habitats

Mississippi River; Missouri River; interior rivers and streams; natural lakes and prairie marshes; constructed lakes, ponds, and reservoirs

Iowa Status

common; native

Iowa Range

statewide

Bibliography

Iowa Department of Natural Resources. 2001. *Biodiversity of Iowa: Aquatic Habitats* CD-ROM.