



NUTRIA AND MUSKRAT CONTROL ALTERNATIVES



Biology Job Sheet TX-18

JULY 1993

The following information is provided for landowners and sportsmen as alternative control measures for nutria and muskrat. These two species are regulated by Texas Parks & Wildlife Department as fur-bearing animals. Texas Animal Damage Control Service's leaflet L-1918, "Controlling Nutria Damage", provides additional alternatives for nutria control.

BIOLOGY

Nutria and muskrat play an integral part in Texas wetlands. These semi-aquatic rodents follow a "Boom and Bust" population cycle. Presently, the numbers of these animals have increased significantly in some areas. Low fur prices, abundant rainfall, and the legal harvesting of alligators have contributed to the situation. Areas of perennial vegetation are lost when excessive numbers of nutria and muskrat consume the entire parts of plants. These "eat-outs" offer increased food for some wildlife but can lead to excessive erosion of shorelines, islands, and marshes. These erosion losses are magnified when a hurricane strikes.

Nutria were imported from South American in 1899 to enhance the fur resource along the Gulf Coast. In the 1940's they were touted as "aquatic weed cutters" and transplanted throughout the Southeast. Nutria are vegetarians and eat an assortment of plants. A variety of aquatic habitats are used, but the nutria is considered a shoreline or edge species. They breed throughout the year. Litter size varies from 4 to 8. Nutria become a nuisance when holes are dug in levees and ponds, agriculture crops are destroyed, or shoreline vegetation is "eaten out".

Muskrat primarily inhabit marshes, although they are found in rice fields, creeks, lakes, and drainage ditches. Preferred habitats are in brackish marshes that support stands of *Scirpus* (three-square grass). When choice food plants have deteriorated, muskrats become opportunistic and take what is readily available. When populations become dense, "eat-outs" occur. In these areas, existing perennial vegetation is replaced by annual plants. Annual plants provide a food source for waterfowl, but when a hurricane hits the Texas coast, areas that are not protected by dense stands of plants can be eroded, resulting in a deep water saline marsh being formed and valuable habitat lost.

CONTROL ALTERNATIVES

Nutria can be controlled by trapping or hunting. While trapping can be time intensive, hunting can also be effective plus offering recreation to sportsmen. Landowners can offer fee hunts to control excessive nutria. Winter months are the preferred time to hunt nutria because of increased visibility in the marshes. Guided hunts can be conducted by landowners or "farmed-out" to guide services. A guided hunt ensures the landowner of a controlled situation. During hunts, the scenic qualities of the wetland should be emphasized.

Muskrat are mostly nocturnal, usually remaining in their beds during daylight hours. They are best controlled by trapping. Hunting muskrat during daylight is difficult.

LAWS AND REGULATIONS

Season, legal means of taking, and rules about fur-bearing animals or their pelts are covered in the Texas Parks and Wildlife guide called Fur-bearing Animal Digest. Persons wishing to hunt fur-bearers should obtain this guide.

The following is a part of the fur-bearing regulations that is noteworthy:

- 1 A trapper's license is required to hunt fur-bearing animals
- 2) Each boat used to transport hunters for a fee must be licensed.
- 3) When hunting outside the open fur season for muskrat, only one muskrat can be taken per day. Animals, pelts and carcasses taken outside the open fur season cannot be sold.
- 4) Nutria are excluded. There is no closed season or bag limit for hunting nutria. Nutria pelts may be possessed at any time.
- 5) Hunting from a boat on public waters is prohibited.