

muskrat *Ondatra zibethicus*

Kingdom: Animalia

Division/Phylum: Chordata

Class: Mammalia

Order: Rodentia

Family: Cricetidae

ILLINOIS STATUS common, native

FEATURES

The muskrat is a large rodent (head-body length 10 to 14 inches) that has long, red-brown hair with some black hairs scattered throughout. Its belly fur is gray. The muskrat has a long (eight to 11 inches), thick, hairless tail that is flattened side-to-side. The back feet are elongated. The ears are small. The front teeth are broad and orange.

BEHAVIORS

The muskrat may be found statewide in Illinois. It lives in rivers, ponds, lakes, streams, ditches or marshes. This rodent eats cattails, sweet clovers, bulrushes, pickerelweed, smartweeds, American lotus, water lilies, sedges and other aquatic plants. Crayfish, mussels and other aquatic animals may be eaten occasionally. The muskrat may build a house of vegetation in shallow water. Its entrance will be 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 their 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. This mammal can swim forward and backward. Only the nose and ears remain above water when it swims. The muskrat is mainly nocturnal. It tends to be aggressive and fight with other muskrats. The muskrat makes a high-pitched squeak and “chatters.” The name “muskrat” comes from the musky odor produced by these animals during the breeding season. Breeding occurs in the spring and fall, and two litters are generally produced per year by each female. Litter size varies from about 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

Aquatic Habitats

lakes, ponds and reservoirs; marshes; peatlands; rivers and streams; swamps; wet prairies and fens

Woodland Habitats

none

Prairie and Edge Habitats

none

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