

How much do you know about the muskrat?

By: Patrick Troyer, Paulding SWCD

Email: patrick.troyer@pauldingswcd.org

The time has come for another installment of our Ohio Wildlife Series. This week we will feature an animal that some might be familiar with while others may not be, the muskrat. Many of you may have seen this animal before but may have confused with a beaver, which is a close guess, as they are both members of the rodent family. Where do these animals live? What do they eat? What do they look like and how do I tell them apart from the beaver? Read on in this article to find out more about another animal that calls Ohio home.

The muskrat is a member of the rodent family that often is mistaken for the beaver. Even though they may look like a beaver, the muskrat is actually more closely related to mice and rats. The first question that many people ask is just how this animal received its name to which the answer is quite simple. According to the Ohio Department of Natural Resources (ODNR), the “musk” part of the muskrat name comes from the foul smelling odor or “musk” that is produced by this animal particularly during their mating season to mark their territory while the “rat” part comes from the fact that their tail resembles that of a rat. There are some other names that the muskrat is known by such as the marsh rabbit or mud cat.

The muskrat can be identified by its’ one to two foot long and chunky body with a rounded shape head. According to New Hampshire PBS, the muskrat has a tail that is vertically flattened which operates much like a rudder that gives it the ability to easily navigate its way through the water. Muskrats, much like the beaver, will find habitat near areas where there is a plentiful source of water. The fur of the muskrat is rather thick and typically is a red to dark brown color and has a soft and shiny appearance.

According to ODNR, the thick undercoat of this animal keeps it warm throughout the winter while its outer layer of fur has long and shiny hairs that are waterproof. Its small eyes and ears along with its rear-webbed feet can further identify the muskrat. It also has a patch of white fur that appears underneath its chin with a darker patch of fur on its nose.

According to New Hampshire PBS, muskrats have a wide range of habitat that stretches from the far northern areas of North America such as southern Alaska, Canada, and much of the United States with the exception of parts of southern California, Arizona, and Florida. As is the case with the beaver, the muskrat likes to make its home in a waterlogged environment such as a swamp, marsh, lake, or pond with plenty of vegetation. They like the vegetation much in the same respect that beavers like plenty of wooded cover, to build their homes. One thing that often confuses many outdoor adventurers is the difference between the beaver’s dam and the muskrat lodge.

Beavers will make their homes out of wood such as poplar or birch trees and hold it all in with mud. The muskrat lodge will consist of aquatic vegetation in greater quantity compared to sticks but they will still use mud to act as the “glue” to hold everything together. Muskrats will stack plants, such as, cattails over a firm base such as a tree stump to create a foundation for their home. The muskrat lodge is designed in a similar manner as the beaver dam with the installation of a series of underwater entrances that allows some protection from predators and can be about 5 feet wide and 4 feet high, according to New Hampshire PBS.

Muskrats will have a variety of foods included as part of their diet such as crayfish, frogs, clams, fish, various aquatic plants such as cattails or water lilies, and even snails. When they are eating, the muskrat creates their own “private dining rooms” that are made up of weeds and plants constructed on top of floating rafts of reeds, according to ODNR. The idea behind this is to gain some form of protection from predators while they are trying to consume their meal. The muskrat will dive into the water in order to find their food while also looking for some plants they can use to build their homes.

According to ODNR, the female muskrat will have anywhere from one to five litters in a given year with each individual litter ranging anywhere from four to seven young muskrats. It is also noted that even while the female muskrat is still nursing her current young, she will often breed. While we have touched on quite a few animals that call Ohio home, there are still plenty more animals to cover! Stay tuned for the next installment of our Ohio Wildlife Series!