

# School-to-Nature



## Muskrat

The Muskrat is in the rodent family, and is sometimes mistaken for the Beaver. Beavers are larger, and have wide flat tails, while muskrats have a much thinner rat-like tail. It is named for its musky smell (used to mark territory) and for that tail. Muskrats live in freshwater ponds and lakes, and are present in Conservancy ponds. The photo at the right was taken by a teacher at Trout Ponds Prairie, during a School-to-Nature outing. It is surrounded by duckweed and has a mouth full of grass.



Taken at Trout Ponds Prairie

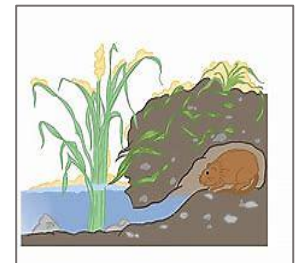
Muskrats can reach 16 to 28 inches long, and weigh 1 ½ to 4 ½ pounds. They have long claws for digging, and two layers of fur for warmth. They are omnivores, but 95% of their diet is favorite plants such as water lilies, so that wetland ecology can be changed where Muskrats live. They also eat mussels, fish, frogs, crayfish, and small turtles. Muskrats do not hibernate but will hunt all winter for food. They can swim under water 12 to 17 minutes at a time. Muskrats are hunted by minks, coyotes, wolves, lynx, bears, snakes, and hunting birds. They are hunted by humans for fur and for their meat.



Muskrats build “push-ups,” dens made of mud and vegetation. See the photo and the drawing at the right. The small dens are often mistaken for much-larger Beaver lodges; those huge lodges are built of branches, not of mud. Muskrats may mate several times during the warm months, and litters of muskrat babies are ready to be on their own to swim, dive, and hunt after about a month. Families remain as large extended groups unless there is too much competition for food sources.



Baby Muskrats



Muskrats can be aggressive, including toward humans, if they feel threatened, so observe them from a distance.

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