

# ASK the AQUARIUM



Larger than a muskrat, but smaller than a beaver, nutria live secretive lives in marshes, swamps, ponds, lakes and coastal rivers. Photo by Emmett Westbrook

**Q.** Is there an animal at the coast called a nutria? I've only recently heard of it.

**A.** Yes, and in large numbers in some areas, but they are seldom seen.

Nutria (*Myocastor coypus*) are semi-aquatic rodents that look like a cross between a muskrat and a beaver. These large, rat-looking animals have a long, thin, round tail, webbed feet and very large, curved, orange front teeth. They move easily through water, using their tail as a rudder.

Averaging 15 to 20 pounds in weight, nutria are strictly vegetarian and have voracious appetites. They feed on roots and stems of plants, which poses a problem in many coastal areas where their feeding habits destroy plants that help hold sandy soil and stabilize dunes.

Native to South America, the rodents were brought into Louisiana in the 1930s with plans to establish a fur trade. However, their pelts proved to be too coarse for the commercial fur market and they were also slow to reproduce in captivity. Some of the animals escaped and

others were released into the wild.

These marsh mammals found the temperate climate of the East Coast much to their liking and began to reproduce rapidly. They can have two or more litters per year, with an average of five young per litter. They first appeared in North Carolina in 1941, and today can be found along the coast from Hatteras to Bogue Sound, with only spotty populations in the southeastern part of the state. Otherwise they are found along the East Coast from Maryland to Florida, and in states bordering the Gulf of Mexico. They also inhabit the Great Lakes regions, and appear as far as Montana, Washington and Oregon. In some areas, they have moved inland to coastal rivers and are believed to be most numerous in marshes of Louisiana and Oregon.

Shy and primarily nocturnal, nutria are seldom seen other than at dawn or dusk. They are easily tracked in the sand, however, by following the unmistakable long, thin line made by their dragging tail.

## Red Skimmers Set Sail



**Red Skimmers Set Sail** – Lining the rail of the Diamond City tour boat are 31 Red Hat Ladies from PKS and Morehead City who sailed from Beaufort on the first day of spring June 21 to enjoy a buffet lunch, lots of laughs and an up close view of the harbor. The weather was picture-perfect for the monthly get together of the Red Hat group. Anyone interested in joining the Pine Knoll Shores branch of the organization should contact Pauly Brown at 247-2959.

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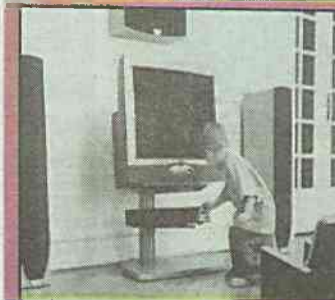
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