Will the Nutria See His Shadow This Year?

By Frederick Boyce

February is known mostly for being cold and short, and cold, but it is also famous for presidential birthdays and Groundhog Day. The groundhog (*Marmota monax*) is the easternmost representative of a group of giant ground squirrels known as marmots. North Carolina is actually the southernmost state in the range of the groundhog, where historically they have been confined to the mountains and northern Piedmont. In recent years their range has been steadily expanding eastward and southward, reaching the Coastal Plain in the Albemarle peninsula and above. For the time being, groundhogs remain absent from the southeastern portion of the state, so this February we might consider a vaguely similar-looking animal that is more at home in our own watery coastal environs.

Unlike the groundhog, the nutria, *Myocaster coypus*, is not actually native to North America but was imported to fur farms in Louisiana in the 1930s, primarily as an alternative to increasingly scarce beaver pelts. As so often occurs, a number of the animals either escaped or were released into the Louisiana swamp lands, where they flourished in the lush aquatic habitats. Since then their range has gradually expanded as they have been intentionally transplanted into wetlands for aquatic weed control and further dispersed by hurricanes. Nutria were introduced to Hatteras Island in 1941 and invaded the Currituck Sound from the north after being released in southeastern Virginia. Their range has steadily increased toward the south ever since, and they can occasionally be seen in the swamps and marshes here on Bogue Banks.

Highly prolific, nutria reach sexual maturity within nine months, and females can produce almost three litters per year, with as many as 13 babies in a large litter. The babies are very precocious, being born fully furred with their eyes open, and they begin feeding on vegetation within hours of being born. They also nurse, and the mother nutria has four pairs of mammary glands located along her sides, rather than on the belly, so that the babies can nurse while she is floating in the water.

I recall first seeing a nutria long years ago at the Dixie Classic Fair in Winston-Salem. Along the side-show section of the midway, somewhere between the "World's Largest Alligator" and the man with four noses and six eyes was a façade covered in lurid paintings advertising the "Giant Rat." For a quarter, one was admitted to a narrow trailer with a mesh-topped enclosure that housed a single disinterested nutria.

The nutria has a round, nearly hairless tail similar to a rat's, and while it was once the sole member of the family Myocastoridae, the nutria has recently been reassigned to the Echimydae, the family of spiny rats—so in a way, it really is a giant rat. Its genus name, *Myocastor*, means "mouse beaver."

Beavers, which can weigh 70 pounds or more, are much larger than nutria and are further distinguished by their broad, flat tails. The species name of the nutria is *coypus*, which is derived from the South American Indian word coypu. The animal is, in fact, only called a nutria in North America. In the rest of the world it goes by the indigenous name of *coypu*, while the name *nutria* is applied only to the fur.

The only other animal besides the beaver that the nutria is likely to be mistaken for in our area is the muskrat, which is rare in North Carolina's southeastern coastal plain. While they are also semiaquatic herbivores, muskrats weigh less than five pounds, much smaller than nutria, which, like groundhogs, can weigh around 12-15 pounds or more. Groundhogs, marmots, muskrats, beavers and nutria (coypu) are all rodents, belonging to the huge order Rodentia, which contains nearly half the mammal species on earth. Rodents are distinguished by their prominent incisor teeth, which grow continuously throughout life, requiring the animals to gnaw almost incessantly to keep them worn down to a manageable length.

According to history.com, it was actually the hedgehog that was first used to predict the weather in Europe, and German settlers in Pennsylvania adapted the tradition to groundhogs. The main problem with using nutria for this purpose is that, being native to the tropics, they don't hibernate—so what it means when or if one sees its shadow is anybody's guess. It likely has little to do with winter, though. Perhaps they can predict hurricanes?

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Sources: North Carolina Wildlife Profiles, ncwildlife.org, nutria.com

Adult nutria (coypu) with young—*Photo by Sam Bland*