

Name: _____ Date: _____ Block: _____

'Ravenous rodent causes headaches' (Star Ledger, 3/18/12)

I. Define before reading the article.

ravenous

plague

eradicate

angst

havoc

II. Comprehend the information presented in the article.

1. What is the main idea of the article?

2. What are some of the effects that nutria have on local habitats?

3. Name two reasons that the nutria are hard to control.

4. How are some states dealing with the problem?

III. Extend your knowledge through research.

Research another non-native, invasive species that does damage in the United States. Give its name, where it came from, how it got here, and the damage it does. CITE YOUR SOURCE(S)!

Ravenous rodent causes headaches

Nutria an environmental nuisance

By TOM BREEN
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

RALEIGH, N.C. — Weighing up to 20 pounds, with orange teeth and an appetite that can reduce wetlands to barren mud flats, the South American nutria is spreading across North Carolina and Virginia — and wildlife officials, trappers and even conservationists say the critter that looks like a beaver and eats like a hog has got to go.

“They’ll go into a marsh and they’ll just clean out all the vegetation in an area and you’ll have these bare spots,” said Dennis Stewart, senior biologist at the Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge. “They’ll just destroy a marsh.”

Nutria, brought to the U.S. as part of fur-farming operations, have long been a plague in Louisiana, where a bounty on the rodents was established in 2002.

Now their population is booming in North Carolina and Virginia, where they were first spotted decades ago. The water-loving animals have crossed state lines and come far inland. They’ve been sighted on the outskirts of Wake County, more than 100 miles from the shore.

Officials in Virginia have launched an effort to identify the watersheds and other areas where nutria are most common, by having members of the public report sightings to the website <http://www.cmiweb.org/nutria/>. Wildlife experts believe the populations in Virginia and North Carolina are related, so once the nutria are mapped, officials in both states, along with the federal government, private trappers and other groups, hope to move onto the next phase: making the mid-Atlantic a nutria-free zone, or as close to that ideal as possible.

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“If we’re going to try to eradicate these things, we need as many partners as we can get,” said Michael St. Germain, project supervisor at the Conservation Management Institute in Blacksburg, Va., which is helping to lead the effort. “It’s not like they respect political boundaries or state borders.”

The problem is even getting attention in Washington, where lawmakers have introduced a bill to fund enhanced nutria eradication efforts in seven states, including North Carolina and Virginia.

The bill passed a key committee last November, and its backers are working to bring it before the full chamber, said Jack Pfeiffer, a spokesman for U.S. Sen. Kay Hagan, D-N.C., one of the measure’s sponsors.

“Senator Hagan is well aware of the growing problems that nutria are causing North Carolina’s coastal communities,” he said.

Havoc on habitats

This all may seem like a lot of angst over a swimming rodent that looks like a cross between a beaver and muskrat, but wildlife biologists and other experts say the nutria’s effect on local habitats is no joke.



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The nutria, a species native to South America, has become a plague in parts of the U.S.

The nutria can eat up to 25 percent of its body weight in plants per day, and it chews plants down to the roots, meaning nothing grows back once the rodent makes a meal of it. They also like to burrow, and some of their favored spots are retention ponds and dikes used to control water levels, contributing to erosion and potential water contamination.

Nutria also breed rapidly: Females first become pregnant around 6 months old, and can have four litters a year of between six and 12 pups per litter. Add that to the fact that, as a South American import, the nutria have no natural predators in the area, and the region has one troublesome rodent species on its hands.

“They can create widespread havoc, that’s for sure,” said Greg Hollis, owner of Sly Fox Wildlife Services, which operates in southeastern North Carolina. Hollis has seen his calls about nutria grow steadily over the years, now includ-

ing a number of farms and industrial clients.

On a recent job at a paper plant, Hollis trapped nutria that were burrowing between wastewater retention ponds and a nearby river.

“If they get through those dikes, you’ve got contamination issues,” he said. “They’re pretty nasty, all right.”

The question is what to do about them. In Virginia, residents are allowed to kill any nutria that cause problems, and in North Carolina there’s no bag limit or closed season on trapping the animals east of Interstate 77. But uncoordinated measures have done little to slow the growth of the creature’s population, said Chris Turner, a biologist with the North Carolina Division of Wildlife Management.

“Being non-native, they cause issues we probably shouldn’t have to deal with, but we do,” he said. “The question we have to answer is exactly how effective can we be when working on a larger scale.”