

# Coypu

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## Species Description

**Scientific name:** *Myocastor coypus*

**AKA:** Nutria

**Native to:** South America

**Habitat:** Inland surface water, mire, bogs and fen

The coypu is a large, semi-aquatic rodent native to South America. It is approximately 1m in length. It has dark, small ears, and a long cylindrical tail.

The coypu was first introduced into Europe in the 19th century for fur farming, subsequent escapes from confinement led to establishment of wild populations. As a result of natural dispersal the species colonised coastal marshes, swamps and other wetland areas in 22 European countries. It has been since been eradicated in 6 countries.

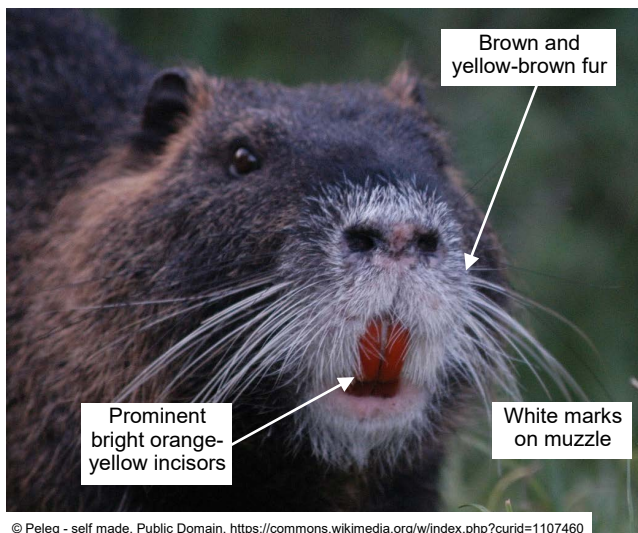
Identification features include; prominent bright orange-yellow incisors; white marks on muzzle; long cylindrical tail and webbed hind feet.

**Under the Invasive Alien Species (Enforcement and Permitting) Order (Northern Ireland) 2019 it is offence to intentionally keep; breed; transport to, from or within Northern Ireland, use or exchange Coypu, or to release it into the environment.**



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## Key ID Features



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# Impacts

*M. coypus* are herbivorous, eating wetland plants and crops, this selective feeding can cause massive reduction in reed swamp. At high densities coypu are able to convert marshland to open water by feeding on plants. This destruction of habitat can have a knock on effect which can threaten rare marshland species of bird, fish and invertebrates.

By burrowing *M. coypus* can increase erosion and cause bank instability in aquatic environments. In coastal habitats, feeding on rhizomes and young shoots of marsh plants leads to plant community breakdown and can lead to erosion.

Coypu can also feed on agricultural crops including sugarcane, alfalfa and root crops.

# Distribution

Coypu are generally found near permanent water, particularly reed beds and swamp/marsh. Also found in rivers, streams, lakes, ponds and brackish marsh in coastal areas. They prefer habitats near the water, animals are rarely observed over 100m away from river.

# Control

A population of around 6000 coypu was eradicated from East Anglia, UK in a campaign using cage traps. In 1981 24 trappers were employed for 8 years at a cost of £2.5 million. Other successful eradication programmes have taken place in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden.

## Similar Species

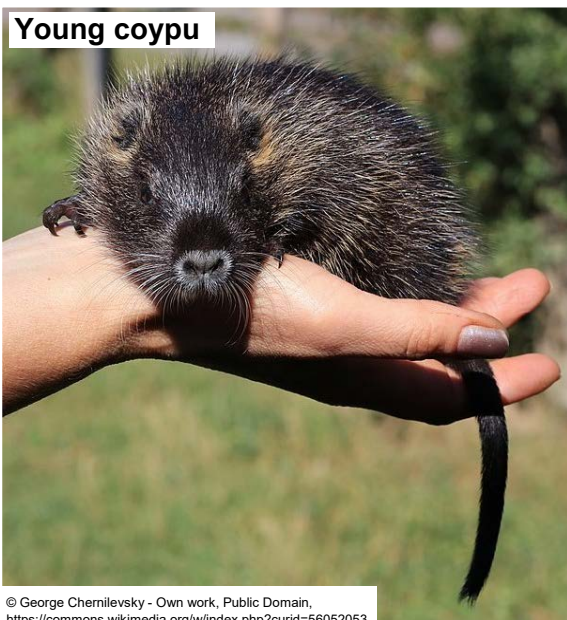
**Brown rat**  
Invasive non-native  
(*Rattus norvegicus*)



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Brown rat (*Rattus norvegicus*) can grow to a length of 15-27cm, much smaller than Coypu. However Coypu young and *R. norvegicus* may be mistaken.

**Young coypu**



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**Muskrat**  
Invasive non-native  
(*Ondatra zibethicus*)



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Muskrat (*Ondatra zibethicus*) is brown, stocky rodent, it is not present in Northern Ireland. Growing between 46 – 67 cm in length and weights between 0.6 – 2 kg it is smaller than the Coypu. It has a flattened tail to assist with swimming and unlike Coypu, the muskrat does not have webbed feet.

### References and further reading:

CABI Myocastor coypus (coypu) datasheet - available at <https://www.cabi.org/isc/datasheet/73537#toDistributionMaps>  
Carter, J. and Leonard, B. P. 2002. A review of the literature on the worldwide distribution., spread of, and efforts to eradicate the coypu (*Myocastor coypus*) Source. *Wildlife Society Bulletin*. 30(1): 162-175.  
Gosling, Leonard & BAKER, S.. (1989). The eradication of muskrats and coypu from Britain. *Biological Journal of the Linnean Society*. 38. 39 - 51.  
Woods, C.A., Contreras, L., Willner-Chapman, G. & Whidden, H.P. 1992. *Myocastor coypus*. Mammalian Species 398: 1-8.

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