

RABBITS & LARGE RODENTS OF ALBERTA



Beaver

Castor canadensis

The beaver, Canada's national emblem, is the largest North

American rodent.

Adults weigh about 20 kg (44 lb), but may get as large as 35 kg (77 lb). The beaver is remarkably adapted to its aquatic and logging life style. Its flat, scaly tail serves as a rudder when the beaver is swimming, as a prop when standing, as a lever when dragging logs, and as a warning device when slapped on the water. (*The belief that the tail is used as a trowel for mud is a myth*). The digits (fingers) and claws of the forepaws are long and delicate to aid in the handling of wood. Those of the hind foot are broad with webbing of skin between the toes to propel the animal through the water.

The long and dense undercoat provides excellent insulation; and the long guard hairs that grow through the underfur form a rich reddish-brown outer coat.

Beaver ponds are usually occupied by one family of beavers. The average colony contains one pair of adults, about four young of the year (kits), and young from the previous year (yearlings). Young do not assist in the work of the colony until their second summer. They become adults in their second winter, and are driven from the colony to start a dam and a colony of their own.

Beavers eat the bark of poplar, willows, cottonwood, and other trees and shrubs. In summer, they also eat pond weeds, water-lillies, and cattails.



Muskrat

Ondatra zibethicus

The muskrat is the largest member of the rat and mouse family in North America.

Adults weigh about 1.5 kg (3.3 lb). Like the beaver, the muskrat is adapted to an aquatic way of life, and is an important and valuable furbearer. Its dense, waterproof, chestnut to dark-brown fur has been the mainstay of many trapline incomes. Unlike the beaver, the tail of the muskrat is narrow and flattened laterally. It is used as a rudder when the muskrat is swimming. The muskrat has short legs, and small forefeet that are used for grasping objects, and large hind feet that are partially webbed and used for propelling the animal through the water. Muskrats spend much of their life in water. They live in family groups, each group occupying a portion of a pond containing a house, feeding areas, and canals through cattails and other pond vegetation. Each family defends its portion of the pond from other muskrats.

Mating may occur several times during the period from March to September.

Litters of 3 to 7 kits are born about a month after mating. Kits are weaned in about a month and are expelled from the home lodge to fend for themselves. Young are able to breed the following year.

Muskrats eat pond weeds and emergent

vegetation. They also eat a variety of animals, including freshwater mussels, frogs, salamanders and small fish.



Porcupine

Erethizone dorsatum

The porcupine is a large, robust rodent. Adults weigh about 10 kg (22 lb.). The porcupine has a thick tail, and

short powerful legs with long curved claws. The unique coat is composed of rows of dense, brown undercoat with yellow-tipped guard hairs. These alternate with rows of loosely attached quills that vary from 25 to 65 mm (1 to 2.5 in.) in length.

The quills taper to a sharp and stiff point that is covered with very small barbs. The quills are hollow, thus reducing their weight and providing buoyancy when the animal occasionally swims.

Porcupines live by themselves, except during mating season. Usually only one porcupine is born to each female. The porcupine is the only North American rodent to give birth to

precocial young. The young are born covered with hair and quills, with eyes open, and they are able to move about soon after birth. The quills are flat and limp at birth but soon dry in the air. Young porcupines are quite large at birth, weighing about 500 grams (1.1 lb.).

In summer porcupines feed on green leaves of forbs, shrubs and trees. They climb trees with ease and spend much of their time foraging in

the trees. In winter they feed on the inner bark (cambium), twigs and buds of trees.



Woodchuck

Marmota monax

The woodchuck is a member of a group of large, ground-dwelling squirrels, called marmots.

Marmots have robust bodies with broad heads, short powerful legs, strong flattened and curved claws, and tails that are about 1/4 the length of the body. The dense, woolly fur of the woodchuck is a grizzled dark brown on the upper parts, and reddish-brown on the underparts. The bushy tail is dark brown to black. Adult woodchucks weigh about 3 kg (6.6 lb.).

Although usually a solitary animal, a pair of woodchucks may share the same underground den in summer. Mating occurs soon after emergence from hibernation in March and April. Litters of 4 to 5 young are born in May. Young emerge from their burrows in late June and are weaned shortly afterwards.

Woodchucks usually enter hibernation in late September.

Woodchucks eat a variety of green vegetation. They also eat insects, and when found, the young of ground-nesting birds. Woodchucks occur in the mixedwood, parkland and foothill life zones (exclusive of the Rocky Mountains) where



woodlots are broken by pastures and meadows..

Snowshoe (Varying) Hare

Lepus americanus

The snowshoe hare is the most widely distributed lagomorph in Canada, occupying all forested regions from treeline in the Arctic to the treed coulees and river bottoms of the prairies.

Adults weigh about 1.5 kg (3.3 lb). The snowshoe hare has very broad hind feet, and larger ears than the cottontail. In summer, its fur is grizzled reddish or greyish brown on the upperparts, and white on the underparts. In winter, its coat turns completely white, except for black on the tips of the ears. At this time the large hind feet are covered with thick and stiff hairs. These feet act like snowshoes (hence the name), allowing the animal to "float" on top of the snow, instead of sinking in it. The tracks left in the snow are distinctive.



Cottontail

Sylvilagus nuttallii

The cottontail rabbit is smaller than the hares and weighs about 1.2 kg (2.6 lb.).

It has shorter hind feet and ears, and the ears lack the black tips of the hares.

The fur is a grizzled brown on the upperparts with grey on the sides and rump, and white on the underparts. The top of the tail is grey, but it is usually the white underside that is shown. Cottontails do not change color in winter.

Cottontails are sparsely distributed in the

coulees, river bottoms and copses of the prairie where there are ample thickets and brush for cover and food. In summer, they eat a variety of green vegetation, with grasses being the most common.

In winter, they eat the buds, bark, and branches of shrubs and small trees

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