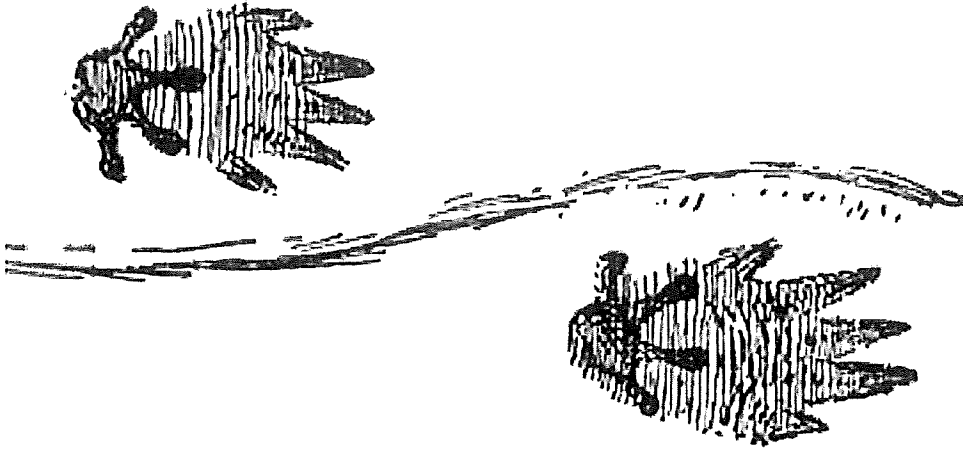


Kelley, Tom USFWS

Muskrat Tracks



Musk rats have four toes on their front feet and five toes on their back feet. They have claws, but the claws might not appear on their tracks. You also might find tail markings in between their tracks. When muskrats walk they group their front and back right feet together and their front and back left feet together. So, when you see their tracks you will find groups of two tracks at a time.



Muskrat

- It is basically a large field mouse that has adapted to life in and around water
- The muskrat's name is derived from the fact that the animal has two special musk glands that it uses to deposit a musky scent around its territory
- It has large hind feet that act like paddles during swimming
- It can find its food during the winter under a metre of ice and snow, in ice-cold water and almost total darkness
- It has specially evolved teeth that stick out ahead of the cheeks and lips so that it can chew on stems and roots under water "with its mouth closed"
- The entire body, with the exception of the tail and feet, is covered with a rich, waterproof layer of fur
- The colour ranges from dark brown on the head and back to a light greyish-brown on the belly
- A full-grown animal weighs on the average about 1 kg
- The length of the body from the tip of the nose to the end of the tail is usually about 50 cm
- The tail is slender and up to about 25 cm long. It is covered with a scaly skin that protects it

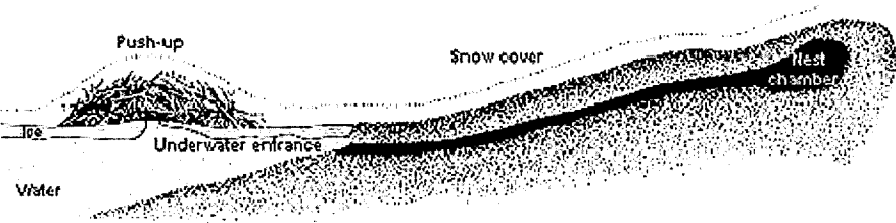
- The hand-like front feet are used in building lodges, holding food, and digging burrows and channels
- Although the larger hind feet are used in swimming, they are not webbed like those of the beaver and otter. Instead, the four long toes of each foot have a fringe of specialized hairs along each side, giving the foot a paddle-like effect.
- The rather small ears are usually completely hidden by the long fur
- The four chisel-like front teeth, each up to 2 cm long, are used in cutting stems and roots of plants
- Muskrats typically live in freshwater marshes, marshy areas of lakes, and slow-moving streams. The water must be deep enough so that it will not freeze to the bottom during the winter, but shallow enough to permit growth of aquatic vegetation—ideally between 1 and 2 m
- When swimming on the surface, the muskrat tucks its front feet slightly forward against the upper chest while using the back feet in alternate strokes to propel the body. The tail is used at most as a rudder
- The muskrat, together with the beaver and several other mammals, is capable of remaining submerged up to 15 minutes if in a relaxed state
- Mating activity occurs immediately following spring break-up in March, April, or May. The birth of the litter, containing five to 10 young, occurs less than a month after the female has been mated. The same female normally has another litter a month after the first, and sometimes another litter, a month after the second

Muskrat Lodge and Push-up

A muskrat builds a lodge by first heaping plant material and mud to form a mound. A burrow is then dug into the mound from below the water level, and a chamber is fashioned at the core of the mound. Later, the walls of the lodge are reinforced from the outside with more plants and mud. A simple lodge of this type is about 0.5 to 1 m high and 0.5 to 1 m in diameter. It contains only one chamber and has one or two plunge holes, or exit burrows. More complex lodges, containing several separate chambers and plunge holes, may be up to 1.5 m high and 1.8 m in diameter.

Shortly after freeze-up, muskrats chew holes through the ice in bays and channels up to

90 m away from the lodge to create "push-ups." After an opening has been created, plant material and mud are used to make a roof over it, resulting in a miniature lodge. Typically there is just enough room for one muskrat in the push-up. It is used as a resting place during underwater forays, and as a feeding station.

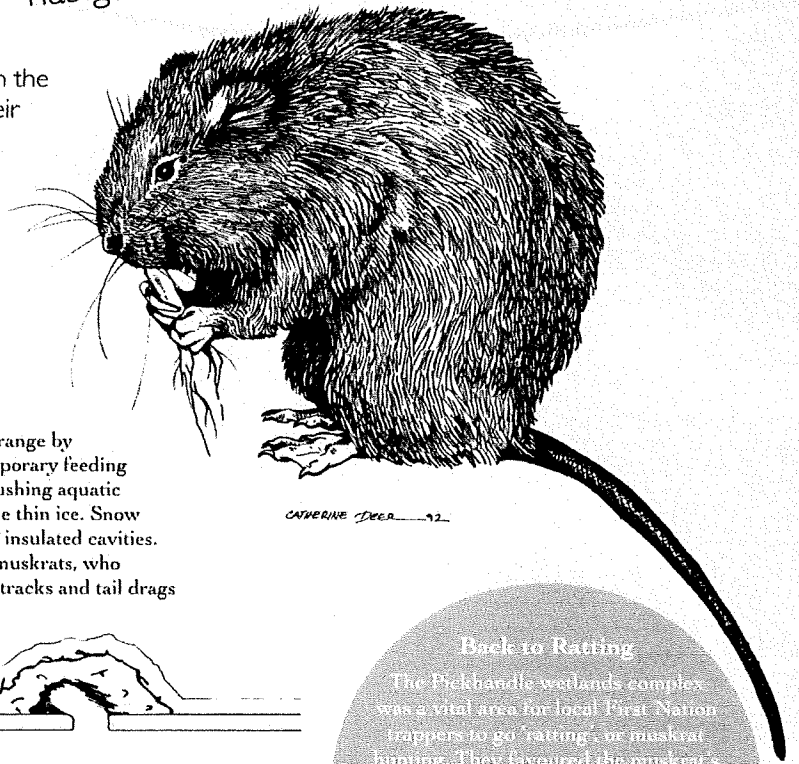


Rats!

Toughing it out in extreme northern conditions has given local muskrats a whole new look.

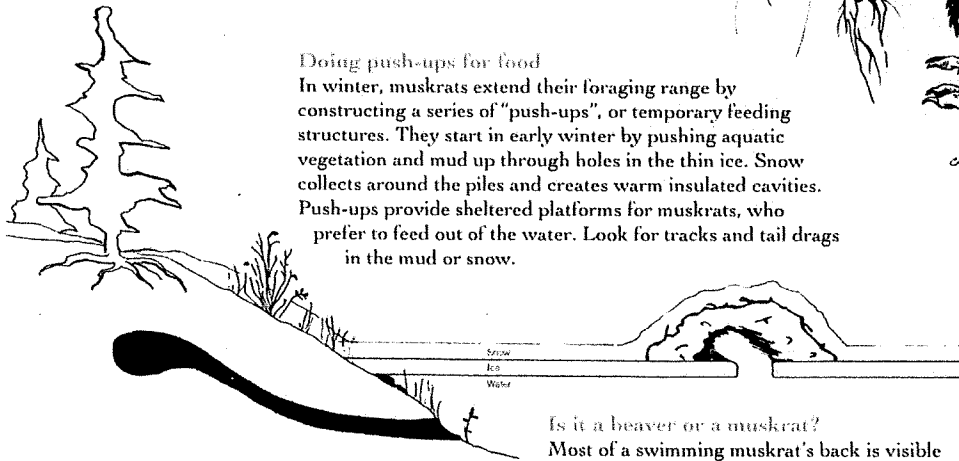


Northern muskrats grow more slowly in the north and are up to 40% smaller than their southern counterparts. They are also darker in colour and take twice as long to mature. These semi-aquatic rodents do not have multiple litters, as is common in the south, but instead have more young in a single litter. Can you think of some reasons for these differences?



Doing push-ups for food

In winter, muskrats extend their foraging range by constructing a series of "push-ups", or temporary feeding structures. They start in early winter by pushing aquatic vegetation and mud up through holes in the thin ice. Snow collects around the piles and creates warm insulated cavities. Push-ups provide sheltered platforms for muskrats, who prefer to feed out of the water. Look for tracks and tail drags in the mud or snow.



Bank Burrows

Northern muskrats live in bank burrows with underwater entrances, rather than build houses of vegetation as is common elsewhere.

Is it a beaver or a muskrat?

Most of a swimming muskrat's back is visible above the water. Swimming beavers show only their heads, leaving a characteristic V wake in the water. Muskrats swim in snake-like fashion moving their tails from side to side. Beavers propel themselves by moving their tails up and down like seals. Both beavers and muskrats have webbed hind feet.

Back to Rattling

The Pickhandle wetlands complex was a vital area for local First Nation trappers to go 'rattling', or muskrat hunting. They favoured the muskrat's sweet meat and warm decorative fur. In 1945, however, all hunting and trapping was banned or restricted with the establishment of the Klondike Game Sanctuary. First Nations can now resume their traditional use of the land within the Sanctuary.



"Government of Yukon roadside interpretive panels at Pickhandle Lake, Alaska Highway."