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Human, Muskrat Relationship Status: It's Complicated

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Missouri - They're cute, fuzzy and love water, but muskrats can sometimes be a nuisance. Biologists with the Missouri Department of Conservation (MDC) say landowners who find leaks in their pond or holes in their dam often find the perpetrator is a muskrat, or a whole local population of muskrats.

Muskrats are short legged mammals, with grayish dark-brown hair, and black, scaly, hairless narrow tail that can be nearly a foot long. An adult muskrat averages about 2.5 pounds, which is drastically smaller than their distant relative the beaver. Beavers can weigh up to 50 pounds. Muskrats reproduce quickly, breeding from spring to fall and having several litters of four to seven young.

Muskrats live near water, around marshes, ponds, and slow-moving streams. They're nocturnal, but will sometimes roam about during the day. They primarily eat aquatic plants, but they will also eat legumes, grasses, grains, garden crops, apples, crayfish and mussels. Although muskrats may damage some agricultural crops near the water, their usual crime scene includes damage to dams and levees.

“Muskrats don't intend to do damage, they're looking for banks that are next to water, but leaks occur when they burrow into levees to build a home,” said Christopher Kennedy, MDC fisheries regional supervisor. “Although muskrats are skilled architects when it comes to building their own homes, they sometimes choose home locations that are in or

around expensive infrastructure. When they choose a pond bank, or levee, it causes problems.”

Muskrat burrows start under water, then rise to a chamber hollowed out above the water level. If a population of muskrats are detected, there are several options to reduce their numbers.

One option is to reduce the amount of aquatic vegetation in and around the pond. Since muskrats are especially attracted to ponds containing aquatic vegetation, reducing these plants can help reduce muskrat numbers. Cattails, burr weed, and arrowhead are all plants that are favored by muskrats. If muskrat control is the main goal, then these weeds must be held to a minimum.

Trapping is an inexpensive and easy method to control muskrats. Muskrats can be trapped using a small conibear, or foot-trap. Traps that are set in runways or den openings can be productive. The trap should be suspended under water and be braced and tied to one or two stakes. This is a lethal method of removing the muskrats. It’s also a legal method, if the muskrats are damaging property.

“The Missouri Wildlife Code states that if your property is being damaged, beyond a reasonable doubt, by muskrats the owner may capture or kill the animal, at any time without a permit,” Kennedy said. “However, you cannot then transport, sell or give them away. You must report it to your local conservation agent within 24 hours.”

However, during trapping season, the muskrat pelts can be sold, he said.

Another method to discourage muskrats is to place rock rip-rap on the levee. The rip-rap layer should be at least six inches thick and extend one foot above the water line and three feet below the water level. This protects the bank from muskrat activity.

Kennedy said although these techniques can help reduce conflicts with muskrats and encourage them to move elsewhere, it is important to realize that muskrats hold value in the ecosystem. As omnivores, muskrats help control populations of both the plants and the small animals they consume. The dens, mounds, tunnels, and canals they construct become habitat for other organisms to use. Muskrats and their young are preyed upon by many predators.

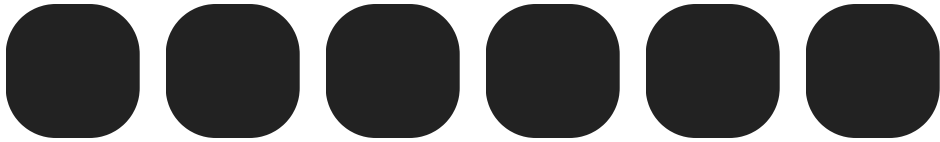
“It’s always important to discern the balance of the wildlife on a property,” Kennedy said. “Although we appreciate the value each species holds, if muskrats are destroying your

pond or levee, it's very likely time to reduce their population a bit right at that location.”

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