

Conservation Corner

By Corinne Peterson
Pocahontas County Naturalist



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Labor Day found our family canoeing on the Badger Creek Lake Watershed. It was fun watching the kids and grandkids interact with nature and each other. When cousins grow up on opposite sides of the globe, believe me, they are excited to see each other!

Located in Madison County, Badger Creek Lake opened in 1980 as part of the Badger Creek Watershed Project. Today the 276-acre lake with its 8 miles of shoreline is best known for its good bass, crappie, and bluegill fishing. After a good workout against a strong breeze, we reached the north shore where the clay bank featured several large, round holes. And while we saw no signs that anyone was currently at home, the holes were probably entrances to muskrat tunnels. As muskrats have yet to swim across Conservation Corner, this week's animal friend will be the muskrat.



Muskrats, *Ondatra zibethicus*, belong to the *Muridae* family. Their cousins include voles and lemmings, not rats. Muskrats are found across North America in rivers, ponds, lakes, streams, ditches, and marshes. These nocturnal aquatic mammals have long, red-brown fur, a gray belly, and a flat, hairless tail. Muskrats mostly live on water plants such as cattails, bulrushes, smart weeds, water lilies, and sedges. Unlike beavers, however, they don't store food for the winter.

Muskrats are excellent swimmers, of course, but did you know they can swim both forward and backward and stay underwater for up to 20 minutes? Only their nose and eyes appear above the waterline as they close off their small ears to keep the water out. While they have semi-webbed hind feet, their strong, flat tails are their main means of propulsion.

Muskrats build huts in shallow water or burrow tunnels into banks in which they live and raise their young, usually two litters of 2-8 kits per year. While born blind and helpless, they grow up quickly, able to swim at 3 weeks and on their own at 4 weeks of age!

Muskrats, of course, also swam across Pocahontas County in pre-settlement days. Old maps record the names of Rat Lake in Swan Lake Township and Muskrat Slough in Colfax Township. Until the arrival of dredging machines in the 1880s, muskrats abounded in the prairie pothole region we now call home. As recorded in Flickinger's 1904 *The History of Pocahontas County*, "The sloughs were so dotted with their houses that they presented the appearance of a hayfield thickly set with piles of hay partially submerged with water."

Native Americans and later white settlers trapped the abundant muskrats for their meat and fur. "In 1879 the number of (muskrat) hides received and shipped from Pomeroy the previous fall and winter was 57,000" (Flickinger, p. 275). Though not approaching those numbers, muskrats may still be found today in shallow lakes, dredge ditches, and restored wetlands across Pocahontas County. I trust they found their way to open water during last summer's drought.

Muskrats also swam across Native American folklore. I'll save those stories for next week.