



The nutria has caused serious erosion problems in Jefferson Parish. (Photo by Dr. Robert Chabreck)

# I'LL BE HERE LONG AFTER YOU'RE GONE...

*By Marilyn Barrett*

**I**f nutria were human and capable of song, one of them might compose a tune to the words, "I'll be here long after you're gone...." A substantial population of these large rodents has been living in Jefferson Parish for at least 30 years, despite serious concerns about the damage they have done to the parish, the potential threat they pose to life and property, and the efforts of Sheriff Harry Lee's SWAT team to eradicate them during nightly target practice. Does Jefferson Parish have a problem?

Those responsible for parish drainage think so. Since most of Jefferson Parish is below sea level, the parish could quickly revert to wetlands without an intricate drainage system. Canals channel the runoff to pumping stations that literally pour the rain into adjacent Barataria estuary and Lake Pontchartrain. About five years ago, those in the department responsible for canal maintenance began to notice an increase in cave-ins and erosion along the canals. Nutria had seriously

weakened the canal banks by overgrazing and building a labyrinth of tunnels under the surface. Although most of these burrows extend 4-6 feet into the canal banks, they are interconnected in a sort of honeycomb pattern so that some extend under the surface as much as 50-150 feet. Occasionally, severe tunneling in a small area will cause a section of canal bank to collapse into the canal. Some parish roadways and drainage culverts adjacent to the canals have been undermined by the burrows. Patches of grass that hold the canal banks in place have been grazed down to the bare ground by these voracious critters. Since the early 1990s, nutria have caused about \$8 million in damages on about 14 percent of the parish's canals on both the east and west banks of the river, according to a 1994 report by the Jefferson Parish Drainage Department.

"That estimate was made almost two years ago," said Marnie Winter, director of the Jefferson Parish Environmental and Development

Control Department. "We have to regularly repack, and replant, and sometimes rebuild whole canal banks."

Nutria used to be valuable; trappers could earn \$7-8 per pelt on the market. When made into dark, soft fur coats, the pelts kept people warm while accommodating fashion in the US and Europe. Today, the fur market is depressed; nobody buys fur coats anymore and few trappers are left.

This nutria problem is not simple. Nutria are not afraid of, or even intimidated by, humans and activities. Jefferson Parish includes busy business and residential areas that might discourage other wildlife, but not nutria. If they can't find enough to eat along a canal bank, they move to residential lawns and shrubs. Nutria live all over coastal Louisiana as well as other southern states, and their range is expanding.

Hardly gentle little balls of fur, nutria carry parasites that have infected people and pets. Hunters who have caught "nutria itch" by walking in



Multiple nutria burrows along Veterans Blvd. Underground, these burrows form a honeycomb of tunnels that weaken roadbanks and make them more likely to cave in. (Photo by Ryan Almerico)

nutria-infested waters describe intense discomfort and inflammation caused by a nematode expelled in the nutria's feces. Nutria carry roundworms, salmonellosis, and a spirochete that cause illness and infection. Fortunately, none of these are fatal. A nutria's sharp teeth can injure another animal — or pet. This nocturnal, fur-bearing rodent lives for only five years, but in that short time, its population increases substantially. Each female can have five litters every two years, according to Dr. Robert Chabreck of the LSU School of Forestry, Wildlife, and Fisheries. In 1995, Jefferson Parish asked Chabreck to determine the size of the nutria population in the parish and to evaluate various means of controlling it.

Nobody knows for sure how many nutria are living in Jefferson Parish. Chabreck and Dr. J. Andy Nyman estimated the Jefferson Parish nutria population at about 10,000 animals by using a process called population indexing. The scientists counted the number of nutria in a

particular area, and then estimated, based on similar space and food availability, the number that might be living in the rest of the parish. This number is an "educated guess." The number is impossible to fix because nutria don't live forever in one place. If the grass looks greener somewhere else, they move and, unlike humans, they don't have any reason to provide others with a change of address.

In the formal report from their study, Chabreck and Nyman describe several alternatives to control this nutria population. All are based upon biological, economic, and social consequences of different control measures as well as public safety, animal welfare, and cost effectiveness. The alternatives fall into two categories: (1) to make canals resistant to nutria damage or (2) to reduce the number of nutria in the canals. Although the first alternative is simple — to line the canal banks with concrete or similar material — it is very expensive. Jefferson Parish has 280 miles of drainage canals and

the cost of lining banks is about \$3,000 per linear foot, around \$15 million per linear mile according to Winters. That leaves reducing the number of nutria in the canals — somehow.

"You can reduce the number of nutria by nonlethal or lethal methods," Chabreck said. Nonlethal methods could include somehow stopping nutria reproduction or relocating the animals. These are easy to define and impossible to do. No practical and acceptable contraceptive methods are available, and other suitable nutria habitat in Louisiana would also suffer the same adverse impacts.

The lethal methods — trapping, shooting and poisoning — are controversial. "Shooting has been an effective wildlife damage control tool for eliminating small, isolated groups of animals rather than for reducing the numbers of widespread populations," Chabreck said. Although Sheriff Lee's SWAT team has killed about 3,500 in the past year, the population is probably still around 10,000. The reproduction



Bank erosion caused by a nutria burrow. Because roadways run parallel to canals in much of Jefferson Parish, nutria burrows sometimes extend underneath the road. If not filled in, these burrows will cause erosion that can weaken the road bed. (Photo by Ryan Almerico)

rate plus migration from neighboring parishes and waterways will more than compensate for the ones that are killed.

“Trapping over bait is more efficient than shooting, but it is too time consuming and costly in areas with high nutria density,” Chabreck added. With no market for nutria pelts, the parish would have a difficult time finding trappers to do the job even if this alternative was selected.

Besides, some animal activists have protested the use of traps to control nutria in the parish because of the pain and suffering that might be inflicted upon the animals. But these activists have not protested the nightly shootings conducted by Sheriff Lee’s SWAT team. “I’m not sure why,” said Winter. “The general public is more accepting of shooting than other proposed control methods like traps or poisons. The perception is that shooting, especially when done by marksmen like the SWAT team, causes less suffering.”

“The only rational technique for removing a significant proportion of a high density population is poisoning,” Chabreck said. His report recommended a rodent poison, zinc phosphide, which kills quickly with only one dose and breaks down almost immediately when dissolved in water, making it less dangerous to the

environment, other animals, and people than other poisons. But this proposal, made by others as well as Chabreck, elicits a strong negative response from the public.

Those who oppose the use of zinc phosphide might not understand the recommendation, Chabreck said. His report suggests that sweet potatoes coated with vegetable oil could be covered with the poison and placed, at night, on floating rafts in a canal. Although nutria are attracted to the coated potatoes, these look unappetizing to people and are unattractive to other animals, which are primarily carnivores (meat eaters). The sweet potatoes are too large to be swallowed by birds or small reptiles. Since this poison contains an emetic, any person or animal that ingests it,

except rodents, will vomit. (Nutria, like other rodents, can’t vomit.) By floating the bait on rafts at night, the poison would be in use when most people and pets would not be around to accidentally take it, and the uneaten matter could be removed from the canals before daylight.

The Humane Society of the U.S. (HSUS) counters Chabreck’s recommendations. The habitat should be manipulated by removing the cover and den sites before selectively reducing the population using live traps, suggested Paul Irwin, HSUS president. This suggestion is not feasible in Jefferson Parish because the canals must be maintained for drainage, and lining them with concrete, which would alter the habitat, is prohibitively expensive, according to Winter.

It appears that Jefferson Parish may have a problem. What can the people do? Everyone has an opinion, but to date, only the SWAT team has been able to take any action. Some groups have been trying to promote increased sales of nutria fur in European markets, but animal activism all over the world has depressed consumer purchases of fur garments. Others have solicited interest from famous chefs like Paul Prudhomme and sought permission from USDA to market the meat. “We have to find a method that is guaranteed to remove only nutria,” Winter said. “It would be best if the state would step in and start a broader program — nutria aren’t limited to Jefferson Parish.”



Erosion caused by nutria burrow along West Esplanade. (Photo by Ryan Almerico)

