

Natural Planet

Ep.4- World's Largest: Rodents

The Rodents, a group that makes up 40 per cent of all mammal species are defined for their continually growing front teeth. They include such species as mice, rats, hamsters and guinea pigs. However in some corners of the globe, evolution has formed giants out of what we would consider small childhood pets. These are the top three largest Rodents in the world.

The smallest of the top three are the beavers of North America and Eurasia. At 90 cm and almost 30kg, their defining feature is the flat tail for efficient and fast swimming. Normally staying underwater for 15 minutes at a time, a third eyelid helps them see underwater yet protects the eye from scratches. They are also famous for the dams they make, sometimes tens of metres long, which create artificial lakes so the beavers can move safely and easily throughout their submerged forest to eat tree bark and branches and to create their home- a lodge of logs, warm in the winter, cool in the summer and impossible to break into, even with the strength of a bear.

Second largest goes to the Coypu, considered by some to be a giant rat. Originally of South America, they are aquatic in nature and have a huge appetite. These rodents will eat everything above ground then go digging and eat everything below ground creating bare patches in grassland and forests called 'eat-outs'. They are definitely considered to be a pest to farmers and scientists alike as they can greatly damage the diversity of life in an ecosystem.

Finally the largest Rodent in the world is the Capybara of South America. This is referred to as the giant guinea pig, growing up to 1metre 30 and weighing up to 60 kg, they are the size of a family dog. Eating grasses and fruits they are the gentle giants of the Amazon Rainforest. On land they can run as fast as a racehorse to get away from predators and can swim equally well with highly webbed feet. Living in family herds, the largest rodents in the world are perfectly adapted to the rainforest and are an evolutionary mile away from the tiny house mouse of Europe.