



ALBIE VENTER

You won't find the name 'coypu' on a list of mammals indigenous to Africa, which is not surprising as it comes from a language spoken only in Chile and Argentina. And the animal it refers to is native to South America. So why, wondered wildlife photographer **Albie Venter**, did he find a coypu in a river in Kenya?

MOST ANIMALS AND PLANTS in their natural habitat live in balance with their surroundings, their numbers kept in check by predators and other limiting factors. But transport them into foreign territory, where these elements are absent, and they become unwanted intruders that compete with indigenous species for food and living space. Some feed and breed so successfully that they oust the locals and are branded 'alien invaders'. More than just a nuisance, such species are a major threat to biodiversity worldwide and millions of dollars are spent on trying to control them.

Like many other parts of the world, Africa has its share of invasive plants, birds and mammals. Black wattles, house crows and brown rats spring to mind, and the impacts that they have on indigenous species are well known. On a recent trip to East Africa I came across a less familiar invader that has made itself at home in the waterways of Kenya's highlands.

The coypu (also known as the nutria or river rat) is a semi-aquatic rodent the size of a young rock hyrax and, except for its webbed hind feet, it resembles a large, long-furred rat. It was first introduced to East Africa in the 1950s to be bred for its pelt, but inevitably some animals escaped from the fur farms and established feral populations.

As their numbers grew, the herbivorous coypus began to destroy large stands of reedbeds, converting wetlands to open water and effectively reducing the habitat available to waterbirds and other indigenous wildlife. A large and voracious population at Lake Naivasha is blamed for the periodic disappearance of aquatic plants, compounding problems caused by another invader, the Louisiana crayfish. Culpable not only for their large appetites, coypus are also inveterate burrowers and are capable of eroding riverbanks and destroying dam walls.

An attempt to eliminate coypus from Lake Naivasha by releasing pythons in the area has proved unsuccessful – and I'm not altogether

A coypu in the Ewaso Narok stream in Kenya's Rift Valley.

sorry. While I agree with the need to eradicate alien species, as I watched a frolicking coypu I couldn't help thinking that it is only doing what it is supposed to do. It finds itself thousands of miles from home through no fault of its own and humans, who brought it there in the first place, are now turning against it. **AG**

COY WHO?

Name Coypu *Myocastor coypus*

Native to Subtropical and temperate South America

Body length 40–60 cm

Tail length 30–45 cm

Mass 5–9 kg

Diet Aquatic plants, including grasses, sedges, reeds and waterlilies

Gestation About 18 weeks

Litter size 2–9