

CRITTER ALERT

Jane Christen, AMS®

Boats share a world with creatures of fins and fur that are seldom considered as a potential source of damage. Many of these creatures seem to have the opinion that upholstery, hoses and wiring insulation are the ingredients of a gourmet meal.



The swimming portion of this rodent assault force includes the muskrat, a most formidable enemy. The muskrat is generally found in fresh water across most of the US, however, it has also been reportedly sighted in seawater in the northwest. According to some articles, their population within a specific area generally rises and ebbs over about a 20-year cycle. Again, in the northwest, muskrats were a big and well known problem twenty years ago in the lakes around Seattle, but with their recent

emergence in large numbers many boaters are being caught unaware.

The muskrat skull is designed for maximum gnawing (destructive) ability. It is defined as an aquatic rodent by Webster's dictionary.



According to the local shipyards, the muskrat is particularly attracted to the taste of the Silicone blue/red exhaust hoses, but certainly does not ignore a meal of standard black hose. Reportedly, years ago the neoprene of large outdrive transom bellows provided a very popular snack.

As an example of the resilience of muskrats, a shipyard owner related the following story: An elderly motor yacht fitted with vintage twin 6-71's, was scheduled for haul-out. The owner started the engines (in all their smoky and sooty glory) and allowed them to warm up for about 20 minutes. The boat was then brought across the lake to the yard and hauled with total run time on engines of about 60 minutes. After the boat was hauled, while standing at the transom with the boat owner discussing the planned work, a "plop" was heard. A large muskrat had crawled out of the port engine exhaust pipe and dropped down onto the cement. The animal appeared somewhat dazed and was coated in soot, but fairly quickly recovered and just ambled over to the dock apron and dove down into the water and swam away. Any animal that could survive in the exhaust pipe of a running engine for about an hour with no obvious ill effects, is due some respect.

However the muskrat is not the only denizen in the waters that enjoys accessing a boat through the exhaust hose. As the offending animal is seldom present for positive identification by a surveyor attending a damage assignment, and incorrect identification could lead to problems, I have followed the request of one adjuster to use the generic term "critter damage". The following photos show exhaust hose damage that happened in an area known to be infested with muskrats.

Any boat that has a wet exhaust with a discharge opening of about three inches or larger is at risk. A critter can and will swim up the exhaust hose and then chew through the hose to the inside of the boat.



The hole in this hose is 6.5 by 2.5 inches and the bottom of the opening is even with the static waterline. Note small clamshells deposited under hose.

The critter usually chews through the top of the exhaust hose just above the internal water line. It is hard to believe that by using claws and teeth a critter can get a hole started in this very tough hose material.



Whenever the boat is hauled, use a flashlight to look up the exhaust and check for indications of critter activity.



If the boat is afloat, carefully look at the exhaust hoses. It is unlikely you will be able to determine if the inner portion of the hose has been chewed away, but it is not unreasonable to give the hose a squeeze in a few places to see if it feels soft at the upper end.

If the water is particularly calm and the boat not used for awhile, the critter may just move in, build a nest and go to work on all the tasty items needed to keep the boat functioning. If the boat is fitted with large and effective bilge pumps, the first notice of a problem may come when the engine is started with very messy results.



The structure at the forward end of these photos is the water lift muffler.



As visible in this photo, the critter often starts gnawing away at the inside surface of the hose over a period of time – without going through to the outside of the hose.

Because part of the gnawed away surface of the inside of this hose is blackened by soot, and other areas are less black, it is possible the engine was operated after the damage was started and the critter returned to do more damage at a later date.

Note that much of the interior layer of the hose has been removed all around the part that has been holed.



A variety of measures can be used to repel rodent invaders, including everything from window screen to barred fittings over the exhaust. Dunato's of Seattle, WA sells an adjustable fitting that installs inside the discharge pipe and is held in place by friction when the threaded bars are turned to extend the fitting.



Insurance policies may not include coverage for losses that result from critter damage.

