RANGE EXTENSION OF THE AMERICAN BEAVER, 
CASTOR CANADENSIS, IN LOUISIANA 

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The American beaver (Castor canadensis) is widespread throughout north-central Louisiana, but to our knowledge has not been previously reported in southwestern Louisiana. We herein describe our finding of two beavers in Cameron Parish, a southern coastal parish bordering Texas, which substantially extends the range of the beaver in Louisiana.

The distribution of the beaver in Louisiana in the early 1930s was limited to the Amite and Comite Rivers in southeastern Louisiana and their tributaries in five surrounding parishes (Linscombe, 1974; Lowery, 1974). From 1938 through 1958 transplants were made of animals from that area to suitable habitats and led to the successful establishment of 75 colonies in 21 parishes west of the Mississippi River and nearly all parts of the Florida parishes, which are the eight parishes (or counties) north and east of New Orleans (Noble, 1958). Ensminger and Linscombe (1982) describe further extension of the range of the beaver to include parts of the central coastal parishes (St. Mary and Terrebonne parishes), but the beaver remained absent in the southwestern and southeastern coastal parishes. Distribution and harvest density for the beaver in the 1983–1984 trapping and hunting season was >101 km²/animal for the state of Louisiana (Novak, 1987).

On 29 March 1994 a dead male beaver was recovered on Highway 82 in Grand Chenier, Louisiana (29°40'N, 92°50'W; Fig. 1). The specimen was found on the side of the road, and was presumably struck and killed recently by a vehicle. It weighed 12.06 kilograms and measured 99.1 cm total length. The tail measured 28.6 cm long × 12.1 cm wide, consistent with that of an adult animal (Novak, 1987). The skull, frozen tissue samples (skeletal muscle and liver), and carcass remaining after pelting were deposited in the collection of the Museum of Natural Science, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge (LSUMZ 35575).

According to a local resident (L. Richard, pers. comm.) a beaver was observed three weeks previously. Although nutria (Myocastor coypus) are common in the area, he noted the beaver's large flat tail and resultant waddling gait as it crossed a road less than ten miles east of the recovered specimen. In the summer of 1993, another local resident reported seeing fresh signs of beaver in a willow slough a few miles west of the Rockefeller Refuge headquarters in Grand Chenier. Two staff biologists searched the area on foot and saw numerous willow trees felled by beaver, with ends girdled by obvious gnawing. No live specimens or scats were noted.

Another dead beaver was recovered in western Cameron Parish on 24 February 1995. The specimen was found washed up on the beach in Johnsons Bayou (Fig. 1), and was estimated to weigh thirty-five pounds (15.9 kilograms). The conservation officer who located the specimen removed the tail (LSUMZ 35576), which measured 30.5 cm long × 14.0 cm wide. This specimen was
FIG. 1—Range extension of the beaver in Louisiana. Hatched area represents prior range as described in Noble (1958); cross-hatched area represents recent range extension (Ensminger and Linscombe, 1982). Asterisks indicate described specimens found in Cameron Parish. Closed circles indicate sightings described in text. Site abbreviations are as follows: JB = Johnsons Bayou; OG = Oak Grove; GC = Grand Chenier; IC = Intracoastal City; PR = Paul J. Rainey Sanctuary; JL = Jean Lafitte National Historical Park; BV = Boothville; PL = Pass a Loutre Wildlife Management Area.

probably an adult, and the sex was not determined. The officer reported numerous felled and girdled willow trees and trees stripped of bark in Oak Grove, Louisiana (Fig. 1), which are suggestive of beaver activity (C. Guillory, pers. comm.).

In adjacent Vermilion Parish, a resident reported seeing two beavers at the Audubon Society’s Paul J. Rainey Refuge (Fig. 1; P. Lege, pers. comm.). A dead beaver was found in spring 1993, possibly killed by an alligator, and a live beaver was observed on a bank of the Audubon Canal in January 1994. Road-killed beaver have been reported during the last several years and a live beaver was observed in February 1995 in Intracoastal City (Fig. 1; P. Lege, pers. comm.), and beaver dams have caused drainage problems in local canals over the last five years.

The range of the beaver also appears to have extended to southeastern Louisiana. An anonymous reviewer of this report had knowledge of beavers at Jean Lafitte National Historical Park south of New Orleans (Fig. 1), which was confirmed by a park official (D. Muth, pers. comm.). Local trappers and park personnel began seeing signs of beaver in this area in approximately 1988–1989, and at least one specimen has been trapped there. Evidence of beaver presence (felled willow trees) has been noted in extreme southeastern Louisiana near Boothville, in Plaquemines Parish (D. Muth, pers. comm.). Similar signs have been observed in the last five years at Pass a Loutre Wildlife Management Area by department biologists (M. Windham, pers. comm.).

Upon questioning, several state biologists have noted that beavers are more abundant and spreading towards the southern parishes in Louisiana (M. Carloss, A. Ensminger, and G. Linscombe, pers. comm.). Interviews with several local trappers and fur dealers did not reveal knowledge of other specimens; however, recent low fur prices have markedly decreased trapping efforts. We suspect the two Cameron Parish beavers gained access to the coastal marsh by travelling the Mermentau River, possibly during flooded conditions of 1994.

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LITERATURE CITED


