

COYPU

The Coypu

Coypu were large South American water rodents, imported into East Anglia for their fur during the 1920s. To the outsider, they appeared terrifying, as giant rats with enormous orange teeth. In fact they were completely harmless, though with no natural predators.

Some coypu escaped during the Second World War, many more appeared when fashions changed and their need of fur was no longer wanted. They bred at terrifying speed, having litters of at least ten at a time. In 1959 1,000 were killed on Hickling Broad alone.

As their population grew problems multiplied. Coypu need vast amounts of food, and the farmers' sugar beet, kale, swedes and carrots proved irresistible. Worse, their need for 'housing' meant tremendous burrowing into and undermining of Broadland river banks (many only just repaired after the 1953 floods).

The Ministry of Agriculture decided to act and set up Coypu Control in 1960, with the ultimate aim of extermination. 100,000 were killed in 1961 alone. By 1987 the last colony was wiped out, and by 1990 the last survivors had been eliminated and Coypu Control was disbanded.

But within Mick Sparksman's surreal creation of libertarian freedom-fighters they live on. For month after month, year after year, the first thing many Waveney Clarion readers did was turn to the back page and read the 'Coypu' strip.

Deakin

No better visual image of Coypu exists than that given by Roger Deakin in 'Waterlog' (Chatto & Windus, pages 200-201):

'Coypu was the star of the paper. Dressed in plaid trousers and a knotted scarf, he was a hippie Rupert Bear... with his friends Reg Rabbit, Ramblin' Dog and Shiftless Mouse, he was forever having near squeaks with the Coypu Control officers.

He had a weakness for Adnams ale, carrots, sugar beet, fresh-water mussels and jugs of home-made sugar beet wine... he was an active member of the bungling Coypu Liberation Army'.

Despite all this, Coypu was seriously 'hip', 'cool' or whatever happens to be in vogue, given to faraway thoughts, frantic action, endless scrapes, and the love of his long-suffering wife. Only in later years was their true identity revealed. He was Vince, she Daphne.

Comix

Coypu grew to having his own publications. COYPU COMIX No. 1, price 7p, came out in an abbreviated size with red and blue lettering in 1973. Two years after 'Coypu 2', 'Tales

from the Marshes' appeared, with Coypu on an 'Easy Ride' style motor-bike on the front cover (12p), and even carried paid advertisements.

'Coypu 3' (25p) appeared soon after, followed by 'Swamp Comix'. This was a compilation of Coypu plus other contributions from Borin van Loon and Tim Rayner/Meg Amsden.

The climax of his career was a stage show, 'Coypu Capers', presented in January 1978 at Geldeston Village Hall, and Beccles Public Hall.