

Rats Information Sheet

General

The two main types of rats that we are likely to see in Australia are the *Rattus norvegicus* and the Roof rat. These rat species generally eat different types of food and live in different types of habitats. It is important to understand which type of rat you have on your property in order to effectively manage the rat problem you are experiencing.

Rattus norvegicus

Rattus norvegicus, (also known as Norway rat, sewer rat, common rat, brown rat, wharf rat) eat a wide variety of foods but mostly prefer cereal grains, meats, fish, nuts and some fruits or pet food. They will travel an area of about 30-50 metres from their burrows or nests in search of food or water. *Rattus norvegicus* are burrowers, building their nests outside the walls of homes or in clumps of vegetation beneath rubbish or woodpiles. Nests can be lined with shredded paper (stolen bait pouches) cloth or other fibrous material. When invading buildings they usually remain in the basement or ground floor.

Rattus norvegicus reach sexual maturity in 2 to 5 months and can breed any month of the year. Litters may number from 4 to 22, with the females having 3 to 12 litters per year. For *Rattus norvegicus*, secure traps and baits close to walls, behind objects, in dark corners and in places where rat signs such as droppings have been seen. Please ensure that any mice and rat carcasses are wrapped and disposed of immediately in order to prevent secondary poisoning of pets and wildlife.

Rattus rattus

Also called Roof rats, Black Rats, Ship Rats, this species prefer fruit, nuts, berries, avocados, slugs and snails. They often eat fruit that is still on the tree. When feeding on an orange they make a small hole in the rind through which they completely eat the inside of the orange, leaving only the hollowed out rind hanging on the tree. They often eat the rind of the lemon but not the fruit. They will travel up to 100 metres for food and are food hoarders stashing supplies of food such as seeds and nuts.

Rattus rattus generally prefer arboreal habitats (living in trees) and are attracted to areas with fruit trees. They live in yucca, palm and cypress trees as well as in elevated areas of human homes. *Rattus rattus* can be found living in attics, rafters, eaves and on roofs. They can live in the landscaping of one residence and feed at another. They often can be seen at night running along fences. They move faster than *Rattus Norvegicus* and are very agile climbers.

The roof rat becomes sexually mature between 2 and 5 months and can breed all year round, producing 4 to 6 litters per year that consists of 6 – 8 babies each. For *Rattus rattus*, the best places for baits are off the ground in locations where rats might be coming down from their nests to find food such as on ledges, shelves, branches, fences, pipes or overhead beams, where they can be fastened with screws or wire. Please ensure that any mice and rat carcasses are wrapped and disposed of immediately in order to prevent secondary poisoning of pets and wildlife.

Habits of Rats

Rats, like mice, are active mostly at night. They have poor eyesight, but make up for this with their keen senses of hearing, smell, taste and touch. They constantly explore and learn, memorising the locations of pathways, obstacles, food, water and shelter. Rats quickly detect and tend to avoid new objects, novel foods, thus they often avoid traps and baits for several days, following their initial placement.

Both rat species cause problems by gnawing on electrical wires and wooden structures such as doors, ledges corners, and wall material and they tear up insulation in walls and ceiling for nesting. *Rattus Norvegicus* can undermine building foundations and slabs with their burrowing activities and can gnaw on all types of materials including soft metals, such as copper and lead, plastics and wood.

Rattus norvegicus and *Rattus rattus* don't get along. The *Rattus norvegicus* is larger and more dominant and will kill a roof rat in a fight. The two species cannot interbreed. Both rats can share the same food resources but will not feed side by side.

Feeding

When living near humans, the availability of foods will drive a rodent's habit. They often will travel outdoors and indoors searching for nutrition. They can take advantage of many food sources such as garbage cans, open containers of food, pet food bowls, and they even cannibalise their own dead. All human food should be disposed of properly and sanitary conditions should be observed. Wood piles and other rodent shelter sites such as overgrown weedy areas should be eliminated. Rats also eat their own faeces purely for nutritional value. So it is very important to clean up any droppings that are found around your property.

Pet food is an incentive for rodents and should be kept in tightly sealed containers. Where dogs are kept and fed outdoors, rats can become a problem if there is a ready supply of dog food. Feed your pet only the amount of food it will eat at a feeding and store pet food in a rodent-proof container.

Management

Sanitation is fundamental to rat control and must be continuous. If sanitation measures aren't properly maintained, the benefits of other measures will be lost and rats will quickly return. Good housekeeping in and around buildings will reduce available shelter and food sources for *Rattus Norvegicus* and to some extent *Rattus rattus*. Neat, off the ground storage of pipes, wood, boxes, gardening equipment and other household goods will help reduce the suitability of the area for rats and also make their detection easier. Collect garbage and garden debris frequently and ensure all garbage receptacles have tight fitting lids.

For *Rattus rattus*, thinning dense vegetation will make the habitat less desirable. Climbing hedges such as star jasmine, honey suckle, ivy, on fences or buildings are conducive to roof rat infestations and should be thinned or removed if possible, as should overhanging tree limbs within one meter of the roof.

Baiting

Baiting involves laying poison baits along rodent paths and in roof and wall cavities. It is very important to ensure the bait isn't accessible to children or pets. Some rodent baits have the potential to cause secondary poisoning. Secondary poisoning occurs when an animal i.e. pets, birds etc., eat a poisoned rat or mouse. For this reason, it is essential to ensure that rat and mice carcasses are picked up, wrapped and disposed of immediately in order to prevent them being eaten.

When purchasing baits, look for ones that contain the active ingredients Warfarin or Coumatetralyl. These poisons break down relatively quickly, and pose less of a risk to other animals that eat a poisoned rat or mouse.

Trapping

There are different types of mouse and rat traps available, from the old-fashioned snap back trap, capture-box style of traps, to automated piston style traps. Placement of the trap should be in the pathway of the mouse or rat, but never above food or food preparation surfaces, in order to avoid contamination by rat urine, droppings or blood.

Do you need further information?

If you require further information please contact the Town's Health Services on 9377 8000.