



## RATS!!!

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The most common rat in our area, and what you might see in your backyard, is the Norway rat. They most likely have built an elaborate home under your back deck or patio. This article is intended to educate the homeowner about the Norway rat and to make suggestions as to how to control the rat population.

### **Do Rats Spread the Plague?**

No. However, rats can carry fleas which might carry the plague...just like any other rodent. These fleas may jump to humans. However, as reported by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), since the last outbreak in 1925, only 10-15 cases are reported each year, mainly in rural areas. Modern antibiotics are effective against the plague.

### **Do Rats Have Rabies?**

While *any* mammal can acquire the rabies disease, rats are not considered a rabies threat. According to the CDC, there has never been a case of human rabies caused by a rat (or other small rodent) in the U.S. The US Public Health Service recommends **AGAINST** getting rabies shots in the case of a rat bite.

### **What about Parasites or other Diseases?**

As with any mammal, rats can have parasites such as fleas, ticks, mites and lice. Rats can spread Salmonella food poisoning, Weils disease (leptospirosis), trichinosis, and other diseases directly through contamination of food and water with their urine and feces (Source: National Park Service, US Dept of the Interior). Unless you are directly handling a wild rat, or you have an infestation *\*inside\** your house, the chances of contracting these parasites or diseases is low.

### **What Is Rat Bite Fever?**

This is an infectious disease that is caught through contact with the urine or oral and/or eye secretions of the rat. According to the CDC, it is rare in the U.S. and easily treatable with antibiotics if caught in time.

### **Do Rats Attack Pets...Children...?**

Rats are predatory animals and may attack a smaller animal such as a mouse or small bird, but rats attacking mammals that are larger than them is not a usual occurrence. However, rats WILL bite. If they believe they are cornered or you startle them, it is possible for them to bite in defense. Children have a high prevalence of being bitten. Usually, when you walk outside, the rat will run into its burrow faster than you can blink. To reduce your chances of being bitten, when moving items around in a shed or other storage area, be careful when reaching into dark areas. It's a good idea to make loud noises when entering the area to scare the rat away. Be cautious of deep containers which a rat may have fallen into and couldn't get out of. You can tip it over and let the rat run away (it might scream when you approach the container...believe me, they are more afraid of you than you are of them). All bites should be disinfected immediately and if you have any concerns about rat bite fever, you should seek medical treatment.

### **I Have Rats Under My Porch... What Do I Do??**

Do NOT panic. Rats are very prevalent in our area. You might even have rats living in your yard and never be aware of it. The best way to control the rat population is to make the area unattractive to rats. Rats want three things: food, water and shelter. If they have these, they are happy campers and will hunker down. Rat-Proofing your house can also help. The number one thing to do is to remove any food source.

#### ***Removing the Food Source:***

- Do you like feeding the birds? Well, chances are you are also feeding the rats. Bird feeders which allow seed to fall below to the ground are a buffet for rats. If you want to continue to feed the birds, but not the rats, look around for spill-proof bird-feeders or get a seed catcher. Suet cakes also seemed to decrease the amount of rats this author saw in her own backyard.
- It is preferable to not feed your pets outside, but if you do, make sure you remove the dishes overnight.
- Completely wash out any recyclables that are kept outside.
- Pick up any fruit that has fallen from your trees.
- Store your garbage in rat-proof containers (metal or heavy plastic trash cans with lids). Tightly close and lock the lids. If you notice any holes in your trash cans, replace them immediately.

#### ***Removing the water source:***

(Note: this will also help reduce the West Nile Virus threat.) Make sure that any containers which gather water are emptied regularly.

Unfortunately, there is little else you can do. You do not want to remove a pet's water bowl or a bird bath, but it is more important to remove the food source.

#### ***Removing shelter:***

- The most important thing you can do here is make sure your yard is not overgrown.
- You shouldn't put any ground cover (like ivy) next to your house.
- Keep your yard trimmed and don't leave wood or construction debris piles next to walls or fences.

***Rat-Proofing your home (Source: National Park Service):***

- Block openings around water and sewer pipes, utility lines, and air vents.
- Install metal kick plates or sweeps on doors and metal jambs on windows and doors.
- Screen air vents.
- Seal any cracks or holes in foundations (above-and below-grade) and exterior walls.
- Repair damaged roof soffits and seal any openings to the roof.
- Repair any gnaw holes after stuffing them with steel or copper wool.
- Equip floor drains with sturdy metal grates.

Following the advice above is the best way of reducing the rat population in your area. Please remember, however, that rats will travel approximately 100 feet from their nests for their food. Therefore, even by following these suggestions, if your neighbors don't, you may still have a small problem. If you don't see the rats in the day time, your problem is very minor and you will probably never be bothered by the rats (unless you have a vegetable garden...rats love tomatoes!).

**A word about poison and other lethal methods of controlling rats:**

While poison is a viable method of controlling the rats in your area, it is not a permanent solution. Unless the environment is uninviting to the rats, more will just take the place of the ones killed. There are two main types of poisons used: ones that affect anti-coagulation (the ability for blood to clot) and those that affect respiration. Neither of these methods is painless. An important issue involving poison is that non-target animals (pets, squirrels) and possibly children could get into the poison. Or there is a possibility that a dog or cat could kill and consume a rat that has been poisoned and then become poisoned itself.

In the case of snap-traps and glue boards, the issue remains that non-target animals can be caught as well. Be aware that with glue boards, the animal may struggle for some time. (Source: National Park Service).

For these reasons, the lethal methods should be debated before use and, at the very least, used in conjunction with the above suggestions.