

# Rodent Control

Presentation by Ken Brown to Association Awards evening September 2019

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Rats are a particular problem on allotments particularly in unturned compost bins.

## Appearance

Up to 40 cm in length, with a tail shorter than the head and body. 335 — 550g in weight.

## Lifecycle

6-10 young per litter but high mortality rate 3-6 litters a year; breed every 6 to 8 weeks

Gestation period of about 3 weeks

10 —12 weeks from birth to sexual maturity

Average lifespan of a wild rat is less than a year but in the right conditions can be up to 2 years

## Habits

Usually around living and burrowing, but sometimes climbs

The preferred food is cereal and grain.

They also love fat balls and seeds put out for the birds and will happily climb trees, bushes or up the leg of a wooden bird table to reach it

They will eat almost anything; fruits and berries that have fallen to the ground, discarded food, dog faeces, snails, insects, frogs, mice, carrion and much more

## Habitat and movement

Brown rats will live in a large variety of different locations.

In natural surroundings they like to burrow into banks, normally near a food source. However, humans have provided them with many habitats: dark unused areas of sheds, wood piles that are not being used regularly, under bushes, in tall thick grass, untended compost heaps or bins, and rubbish that has been left outside, in holes or gaps under buildings

Rats tend to stay within a restricted area, provided there is sufficient food; their territory is usually small and within a 50 metre radius of the nest but if food is hard to come by a rat will travel quite a distance, up to 2 or 3 miles every night in search of a tempting food supply. When venturing out of the nest rats will always follow the same routes, hence the term "rat runs", and these soon become obvious

Brown rats are basically nocturnal. There are three main reasons why rats are seen during the day:

- food has become scarce
- the nest has been disturbed
- the rat population is high

## Controlling infestation

For a site such as Bridge Fen eradication is difficult and any control methods are likely to have only a temporary effect unless used on a very regular basis. There are also cost and management implications.

Prevention is likely to be the best cure and good site maintenance routines are essential.

**All plot holders** are responsible for keeping their areas tidy and using best endeavours to prevent infestation such as:

- block access points in and under sheds or structures: a rat will easily squeeze through a 1" hole.
- good waste management; removing rubbish from the site and regularly moving storage piles.
- turning compost heaps regularly, every 6 to 8 weeks is recommended.
- only compost vegetation from site, avoid using household waste on compost heaps.
- do not feed birds and wildlife with items such as fat balls, wild bird seed, nuts.

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## Controlling infestation (contd.)

### Removal of Harbourage (places to live / shelter)

- Remove all debris, rubbish, old equipment from the plot
- Minimise the amount of materials you keep on plot (e.g. timber and sheets of tin)
- Ensure that any structure is housed on hard standing (paving slabs) to prevent rodents from burrowing in underneath. For example, shed/s, storage units, greenhouses etc.

### Removal of Food Sources

We recognise that this is a tall order on an allotment However, there are some steps you can take, including:

- Not leaving household waste on site, including in compost bins
- Harvesting fruit and vegetables promptly
- Don't leave discarded fruit and vegetables around
- Turn the contents of your compost heap and bins regularly
- Keep any food / compost securely (e.g. use bins with solid sides and lids; add a wire mesh lining in the base etc.)
- Do not feed birds or other animals at your plot.
- Store seeds, bulbs. in rodent-proof containers

## Ensure Good Housekeeping

- Keep your plot tidy — encourage neighbouring properties to do the same
- Visit regularly, make your presence known (e.g. kicking compost bins)
- Inspect the plot regularly
- Thoroughly wash (and peel, as appropriate) the fruit and vegetables you harvest and destroy all vegetables with signs of rodent damage.
- Note that rats carry risk of disease including Weil's, Salmonella and Leptospirosis because they urinate everywhere
- If you discover you have a rat infestation, make sure you wear disposable gloves when dealing with the problem and harvesting your vegetables
- Keep your sheds / storage unit/s / greenhouse/s tunnels etc. secure and in good order; check regularly for signs of rats living underneath.

## Our message of the day:

Killing rodents (including mice) can only provide short term control of populations. Sustainable control can only be achieved by reducing the rodent carrying capacity of the environment. The best way to deal with rodent infestations is not to have them in the first place.

Remember, it's a criminal offence to cause unnecessary harm to any animal. Under current regulations the sale and use of rodenticides (rat poison to you and me) is now tightly controlled, with fines or custodial sentences for contraventions. If you kill non-target species when putting down poison e.g. by allowing rats to become poisoned carrion for creatures higher up the food chain, you could end up in prison. Now here is the main change in our procedures:

**because of the new legislation from January 2018 there will be no poison used on any site controlled by the Association**

Effective mechanical traps with enclosed bait are available and Ken will be delighted to advise on their use.

Food is a need. All living creatures cannot survive without satisfying their necessity for sustenance. The same is true with rats. Aside from the fact that it is a must for them to survive, it also serves as a temptation they cannot withstand. Thus, if you want to catch the rats on your allotment, you need to have a good and effective

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bait. The quality of your trap is only as good as the quality of your bait. Notwithstanding the power of your trap, if you have a very poor bait, rats will never fall into it. Meaning, you need to prepare an irresistible food to tempt the rats for them to fall in your bait.

After the preparation of the food to serve as your bait, you need to understand that rats have delayed gratification mechanism. It means to say that they have a very strong self-discipline. Even how tempting the food is, their will is still stronger. Thus to weaken this defence, you need to condition them.

You have to let them get used to the food bait that you have by placing the food in their regular pathways. Their instinctive tendency is that, they will taste the food in little pieces until they know that it is safe, and they will not touch something that is new for them, including the platform or the trap where you placed your food bait. After a few days of conditioning them, you can now activate the trap assured of a high percentage of success.

In addition, the strategic positioning of the trap should be parallel or must coincide with the rat bait and the trap to further ensure the success rate of the implemented trap.

You can use humane traps and release them far away but you must remember that rats will travel miles to return to their nest. Also, why give the problem to someone else?

## Summary

- If you think rats are living on your plot tell your site rep as soon as possible. They will provide or obtain specialist advice to be compliant with current legislation
- Don't put poison down yourself or use traditional methods – you may be breaking the law and in breach of your Tenancy Agreement
- Remember - Avoidance is far preferable to Elimination

