

RATS!

Yuk! Rats! There are few animals in the world that have a lower reputation—They're incredibly destructive; they carry diseases...and they just look *nasty!* [*I remember the one that gnawed through the screen one night, and, when I came into the kitchen the next morning, there he was, standing in the middle of the floor, preening himself, not a care in the world!*] And yet, put a bushy tail on him, and he immediately becomes that cute little squirrel!

Rats have long been considered deadly pests. Once considered a modern myth, the rat flood in India occurs every fifty years, as armies of bamboo rats descend upon rural areas and devour everything in their path. Rats have long been held up as the chief villain in the spread of the Bubonic Plague; however, recent studies show that rats alone could not account for the rapid spread of the disease through Europe in the Middle Ages. Still, the Centers for Disease Control does list nearly a dozen diseases directly linked to rats.

Most urban areas battle rat infestations. A 2015 study by the American Housing Survey found that eighteen percent of homes in Philadelphia showed evidence of rodents. Boston, New York City, and Washington, D.C., also demonstrated significant rodent infestations. Indeed, rats in New York City are famous for their size and prevalence. The urban legend that the rat population in Manhattan equals that of its human population was definitively refuted by Robert Sullivan in his book *Rats*, but illustrates New Yorkers' awareness of the presence, and on occasion boldness and cleverness, of the rodents. New York has specific regulations for eradicating rats; multifamily residences and commercial businesses must use a specially trained and licensed rat catcher.

Rats have the ability to swim up sewer pipes into toilets. [*There's a comforting thought!*] Rats will infest any area that provides shelter and easy access to sources of food and water, including under sinks, near garbage, and inside walls or cabinets.

When introduced into locations where rats previously did not exist, they can wreak an enormous degree of environmental degradation. The black rat is considered to be one of the world's worst invasive species. Also known as the ship rat, it has been carried worldwide as a stowaway on seagoing vessels for millennia and has usually accompanied men to any new area visited or settled by human beings by sea. The brown rat, or wharf rat, has also been carried worldwide by ships in recent centuries.

The ship or wharf rat has contributed to the extinction of many species of wildlife, including birds, small mammals, reptiles, invertebrates, and plants, especially on islands. True rats are omnivorous, capable of eating a wide range of plant and animal foods, and have a very high birth rate. When introduced to a new area, they quickly reproduce to take advantage of the new food supply. In particular, they prey on the eggs and young of forest birds, which on isolated islands often have no other predators and thus have no fear of predators.[47]Some experts believe that rats are to blame for between forty percent and sixty percent of all seabird and reptile extinctions, with ninety percent of those occurring on islands. Thus man has indirectly caused the extinction of many species by accidentally introducing rats to new areas. Believed to be the most populous mammal, rats are found on almost all continents. So, just how many rats are there? As Carl Sagan would say...“Billions and billions!”

