

We are family

IF HUMANS DID NOT LEAVE SO MUCH WASTE LYING AROUND,
RAT NUMBERS WOULD FALL DRAMATICALLY

Feared, hated and persecuted, the rat is a paradox. It remains the most successful creature in Britain. It has been blamed for all manner of horrors, and indeed may spread and carry many diseases that include several zoonoses, ones passed from animals to humans, such as Weil's disease (leptospirosis) and salmonella.

It was with dismay that I sleepily rose early one morning to make tea and looked out on the garden and bird feeders while the kettle was boiling. A large brown alien was making its way up a teasel plant and then on to the peanut feeder. I was incensed to see it swinging on the nuts and tucking in with gusto and then abseiling its way back down with the skill of a muscular mountaineer.

Oddly, a creature that is viewed as being filthy and disease ridden is actually an extremely clean animal, has a complex family life, and only exists in such gigantic numbers because of the disgusting manner in which we as humans conduct our lives. If we did not leave so much of our waste lying around, then there is no doubt that rat numbers would fall dramatically. From a cynical viewpoint it seems that we make it blissfully easy for rats to exist, chucking our litter everywhere, leaving half eaten take-away packaging and many other delectable delicacies most attractive to the gourmet rat about town. It is said that you are very seldom more than a few feet away from a rat, be it in your attic space, garden, drain or sewer.

Currently it is thought that there are as many rats as humans in the British Isles, and given the ideal habitat we provide for them, in a good year this frightening statistic may rise even higher. It would pose an interesting challenge to ask a statistician to work out how many rats a pair may produce in a year, given that this rodent with impressive fecundity starts breeding at the age of ten weeks, and can produce up to five litters a year with on some occasions as

RAT IMAGES © OLEG KOZLOV ENGRAVING/STOCK. BROWN RAT AND YOUNG © STEPHEN DALTON/NHPA LIMITED.



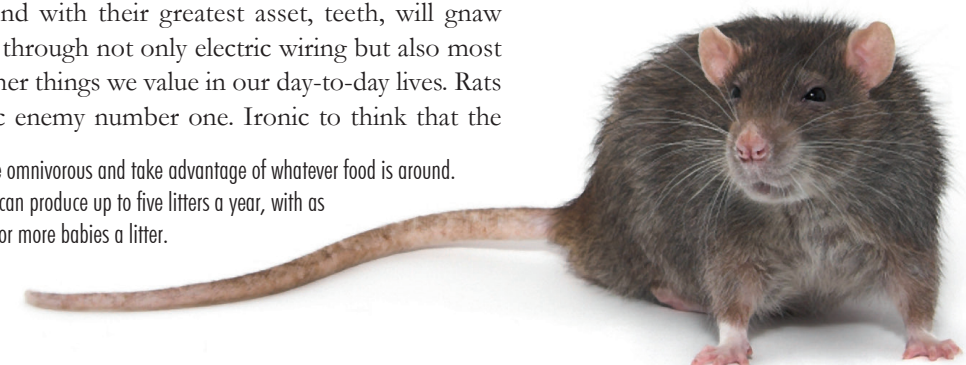
CURRENTLY IT IS THOUGHT THAT THERE ARE AS MANY RATS AS HUMANS IN THE BRITISH ISLES, AND GIVEN THE IDEAL HABITAT WE PROVIDE FOR THEM, IN A GOOD YEAR THIS FRIGHTENING STATISTIC MAY RISE EVEN HIGHER.

many as 12 or more babies a litter. Even if less than half the offspring produced are female, it still means that a pair can produce a whole plague of rats, amounting in real terms to many thousands per annum, with ease. Luckily a rat's life is short and young rats have a low survival rate due to poisoning and predators. But like it or not, rats are here to stay.

In Scotland, rats tend to be more noticeable in winter when they move into farm buildings and houses, creating mayhem wherever they go. Most country dwellers are well aware of the telltale signs of shiny liquorice torpedoes left round feed sacks in outbuildings.

Rats find their way into buildings through the smallest gaps – a half inch hole is quite big enough for forced entry – and with their greatest asset, teeth, will gnaw their way through not only electric wiring but also most of the other things we value in our day-to-day lives. Rats are public enemy number one. Ironical to think that the

Left: Rats are omnivorous and take advantage of whatever food is around.
Above: They can produce up to five litters a year, with as many as 12 or more babies a litter.





first sign of a sinking ship was the mass exodus of rats, yet it was frequently their gnawing that had holed the wooden vessel in the first place.

Rats fuel people with feelings of loathing and hatred, they are little understood but are biologically very little different to mice. They do bite when cornered, though would



Interestingly, both species of rat found in the British Isles are non-native; the black, or aptly named ship's rat, came to Britain from South East Asia, probably as far back as the 11th century. Now the only true colony remaining for this, one of our rarest British mammals, is in the remote Shiant Islands in the Minch, where

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rarely, if ever, fly for the throat as has been documented in the past. Rats are territorial and become familiar with their patch using incredibly sensitive tactile hairs to feel their way along well-worn runs. They immediately notice when there is something new in the way, such as a trap. This is why it usually takes some time before you will catch one. Being omnivorous they are adaptable and equally able to exist in a sewer or a hedgerow, town garden or remote Scottish island. However, they suffer population crashes and explosions according to food availability, and though many die during times of famine, enough always survive to rebuild numbers with alacrity.

They are superb swimmers, climb with ease, and have in recent years become resistant to many of the poisons we lay down for them, thus exacerbating our constant problem.

approximately 3000 live. There are thought to be a few small colonies in other islands in the Forth and also on Lundy Island. Though rats have been a huge problem on many islands with a big sea bird population, a balance seems to have been struck on the Shiant Islands and the rats are left un-persecuted.

It was the black rat which was responsible for the spreading of the devastating Great Plague of London in 1665, when the fleas off the rats carried the disease with disastrous consequences. The much larger and widespread brown rat came here later, around the mid 1700s, on ships coming to Britain from Russia. Its sheer size and strength meant that it easily ousted the smaller, daintier coloniser.

The first brown rat recorded on another important bird island, Ailsa Craig, arrived when the coal puffer brought in supplies to keep the newly built lighthouse going in 1889. This was the first time that a rat had been recorded on the island since medieval times. Other large ships wrecked

CURIOUS RATS DRINKING MILK, TONIS VAUING/ISTOCK. ENGRAVING PHOTO BY D WALKER. RAT IN POCKET IMAGE © JOSEPH COV/ISTOCK



THE FIRST BROWN RAT RECORDED ON ANOTHER IMPORTANT BIRD ISLAND, AILSA CRAIG, ARRIVED WHEN THE COAL PUFFER BROUGHT IN SUPPLIES TO KEEP THE NEWLY BUILT LIGHTHOUSE GOING IN 1889.

on the rocks close by are thought to be responsible for the arrival of many more, and soon the island was totally overrun with rodents wreaking havoc on the eggs and young chicks of the nesting puffins and other seabirds till the former had almost been wiped out. There were numerous half-hearted attempts to rid the island of this pest, all to no avail. But something had to be done on a larger scale to save the seabirds. Eventually, in 1991, at least three tons of rat poison was flown in by the Royal Navy, and with a great deal of care to avoid non-target species, proved a success. Rats were finally cleared from the island.

Recently a ship wrecked off St Kilda caused great concern in case rats went ashore there. Following the disastrous consequences of rats on Ailsa Craig, valuable lessons had been learned and measures were taken to avert possible disaster. Rat traps were set, but luckily no rats were found to have gone ashore, and fears for such an important seabird nesting site were unfounded.

The introduction of non-native species into our sensitive ecosystems is always fraught with problems. Though rats have even now been immortalised through such well-known children's heroes as Roland Rat and Beatrix Potter's Samuel Whiskers, there is little doubt that their presence does cause us untold expense and a great deal of worry. Even though owls, birds of prey and domestic cats prey on them, with such vast numbers they are never going to make a true impact.

Rest assured, if you are seeing one rat, there are probably at least several hundred very close by. **SF**



Top left: Rats are treated royally at an Indian temple dedicated to the rat goddess, Karni Mata. Right from top: The council held by the rats, a scene from the fables of La Fontaine. Engraving by Gustave Doré; If you see one rat, there are hundreds close by.

