

The Curse of the Rats

By Anita Bong

Live in the Northern Rivers region and you will have problems controlling mammals entering your house. About 10 years ago, I lost my favourite cat to feline AIDS (yes cats can get this as well), which was a great personal loss. After a while I noticed something strange - the marsupial and rodent population started to spiral out of control.



The bush rat, Rattus fuscipes

At first, the antechinus were viewed as being so very cute, as they clambered up my wardrobe on their nightly search for insects. After a while, mounds of smelly antechinus poo started to accumulate in various spots around the house. Then there were the multitude of rodents. At one stage I was sharing my house with four mammal species - two of the local bush rats, a tiny field mouse and at least one species of antechinus.

It all became too much, especially after I saw a TV program on the deadly hanta virus, which is spread by rodents in the USA and east Asia. The situation was very unhealthy and so embarrassing when my city friends came to stay. Only food in tin cans or glass jars could be safely stored in the cupboards. All other food was piled onto a central table in the kitchen, as the animals could not climb up its very curved cabriole legs.

The last straw came when the pests ate all the dope seed in my seed trays. The bastards - every seed was eaten - and it was a special strain of pot imported from Holland that I had cultivated lovingly for years. After that it was war.

Trap Options

Firstly, I tried the old-fashioned spring traps, but they were too cruel. Being woken up at night by a rat running around the kitchen with a spring trap snapped around its head was distressing both for the animal and me. Then I tried a very fancy trap imported from the USA. In theory,

the animal was supposed to enter the trap and a spring would push it safely into a little compartment from where it could be relocated and become someone else's problem.

The reality was very different for the larger rodents and reptiles. Several times I had to rescue injured animals with their legs and tails sticking painfully out of the trap. Again this option was too cruel. Then I tried the Elliott Traps, which were the best and the ones I would recommend to use. Elliott Traps will not injure the animal, which can be safely relocated after capture. However, you have to thoroughly wash the trap often, as the animals leave a scent to warn others of danger and to stay away. Even if you wash frequently, the animals still seem to become cautious of Elliott Traps over time and the capture rate declines anyway.

A few traps were designed by yours truly, all of which were complete failures. One was a diving board set up, whereby a tempting piece of macadamia paste was placed at the end of a long flat piece of wood. The animals were supposed to walk out onto the diving board, which would then drop into a large rubbish bin. I could easily capture them - at least in theory. My success rate was zero. These animals are not stupid - how do you think they survived in the harsh Australian bush for millions of years?

After failing with traps, I finally resorted to commercial poisons. Alas the animals can die a very painful

death. They will also leave the house and be eaten by wildlife, thereby resulting in the deaths of snakes, birds of prey, goannas and so forth. Domestic pets are also at risk of being poisoned. This it not a good outcome, as it defeats one of the main reasons why we live in our beautiful valley. I started looking at other options.

For Sadists Only

These methods result in a cruel death for the animal, but will not result in wildlife kill.

Feed your little invaders with a 50 - 50 mixture of milk powder and plaster of Paris. Apparently, this sets solid in the victim's gut and they die. Painful for the victim but non toxic for the wildlife.

Feeding them dry Deb mashed potato mix, which it is supposed to swell inside the animal's gut thereby killing it. I always wondered what you could actually use this product for - only people living on the Gold Coast could find it very palatable.

More Humane Methods

Sprinkle the hottest of hottest chilli powder around the area that the animals are invading. The animals will try and get rid of it by licking their feet, with very painful results. One friend had bush rats eating her passionfruit. So she sprinkled hot chilli powder over what remained of the crop. At night she could hear the rats squealing in agony and, after a few days, they never returned.

Another friend threw bread out on the middle of

her expansive lawn so that the rats will be exposed to the predations of owls and frogmouths. This may or may not work, but some people may like to try it.

Get a cat that is a good ratter. It will reduce your rodent population to virtually zero, especially if you do not feed the cat whenever the rodent numbers start rising. However, you are taking on a 15-year commitment to care for the cat and they are notoriously bad for killing small wildlife. I like cats, but decided not to get another one for these reasons.

There are contraptions that you can buy to insert into your electric power sockets. Apparently, they emit a high frequency sound that is very irritating to rodents, but we humans cannot hear it. One friend tried it with favourable results, as the animals just left the scene. This is the one promising option that I have yet to try.

In the end I just went back to using commercial poisons from Woolworths and just hope for the best. It is not a desirable outcome, but so much better than a rat-infested household. Please let Anita know if you have any better solutions to get rid of rodents and antechinus in your house.

All the best keeping your rodent invasion under control. How you will deal with the problem is really a balance between the need to keep your living space free of vermin, giving the animal the least painful death and protecting the wildlife. All the best on that one as it requires the wisdom of Solomon.



Antechinus stuartii, a small dasyurid marsupial

Not in the house - native or not. Pictures: UNE Science faculty

Grist for the Mill

Environmental news from our favourite on-line magazine

You Light Up My Strife

Solar LED lamps provide clean, cheap lighting to rural poor

A handful of villagers in rural India are receiving a life-transforming technology: low-cost, solar-powered light-emitting diode (LED) lamps. Bombay-based Grameen Surya Bijli Foundation has installed the \$55 lamps free of charge in about 300 homes. "Children can now study at night, elders can manage their chores better," says one father whose family received a lamp. "Life doesn't halt anymore when darkness falls." As many as 1.5 billion people worldwide light their homes after dark with dim, smoky kerosene-burning lamps, which emit air pollutants thought to cause over a million deaths every year. LEDs are far more efficient than incandescent bulbs, and the solar-powered lamps eliminate indoor pollution from burning candles, paraffin, or kerosene. Says electrical engineering professor Dave Irvine-Halliday, "This technology can light an entire rural village with less energy than that used by a single conventional 100-watt light bulb."

Buenos Bios

South American biofuels gaining steam, freaking the U.S. out

As Frank Sinatra zippily informed us, they've got an awful lot of coffee in Brazil. They've also got an awful lot of sugarcane and soy, two crops that come in handy for making ethanol and biodiesel. And we'll be darned if they aren't churning that stuff out by the ton! As talk of peak oil increases, Brazil seems poised to give the U.S. a run for its alternative-fuel money -- and a few other South American countries aren't far behind.

Trawl of Tears

Deepwater fish being pushed to the edge of extinction

Key species of deep-sea fish are nearing extinction, having declined by up to 98 percent in the past few decades. In a new study in the journal Nature, three researchers analyzed catches of five deepwater species from the northwest Atlantic, off the Canadian coast -- each seldom harvested prior to the 1970s. They found that populations of all five had fallen precipitously, qualifying them as critically endangered under commonly accepted international standards. Similar trends have been seen in European waters. Much of the blame is being put on commercial trawlers, which in the last two decades have increasingly gone after deep-sea species. Said study coauthor Jennifer Devine, "One step that should be enacted is the protection of deep-sea habitats." Conservationists worry that because deepwater fish typically live long lives, and can take up to 25 years to sexually mature, overfishing can wipe them out in a single generation.

Stickin' It to the Pan

DuPont to pay \$16.5 million for hiding chemical's risks
DuPont will pay \$16.5 million in a settlement with the U.S. EPA for failing to report information on health and environmental risks of perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA), a chemical used to make Teflon and other plastics. Greenies are shocked that the company won't be forced to admit liability or apologize, and say the fine is woefully inadequate for DuPont, which makes an estimated \$200 million annually from products manufactured with PFOA. The chemical can build up in blood, persist for years in the body, and contaminate water, and it may cause developmental defects. The deal includes a \$10.25 million fine and at least \$5 million devoted to studies officials hope will explain why PFOA is being found in people and animals worldwide. Ironically, one reason DuPont got dinged in the first place was for hiding a study on PFOA's impacts for about 20 years.

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