Woodrats

Urban Wildlife Damage Control

The proper common name is Eastern woodrat *(Neotoma floridana).* The name many Kansas people use when referring to this native rodent is the pack rat. Another less common name is the trade rat.

Two species of woodrats are found in Kansas. One is the Eastern woodrat (*Neotoma floridana*) and the other is the gray woodrat (*Neotoma micropus*). The Eastern woodrat's range in Kansas is east and north of the Arkansas River. The range of the gray woodrat is south and west of the Arkansas River. Both woodrats are similar in appearance and behavior.

The adult woodrat is brownish-grey mixed with black on the upper side of its body. The throat, belly and feet are white. The total length of the adult varies from 12 to 17 inches and its weight from 6 to 12 ounces. Woodrats are active at night.

Woodrats are thought to have a longer lifespan than most other rats. In captivity a woodrat lived 4 years and in the wild they have been known to live 3 years.

Another reason for this belief is that woodrats have a lower reproductive rate than the other rats. Rats with a high reproductive rate generally have shorter lifespans.

Woodrats prefer to build their nests in rock crevices. If this habitat is not available, woodrats will build nests in brush piles, under fallen trees, around the base of trees, sometimes in the branches of trees. The woodrat packs sticks and twigs to the den for construction.

Woodrats have a peculiar habit of collecting objects, which gives rise to the common names mentioned earlier: the pack rat and the trade rat. These rats pick up many things, particularly shiny or metallic objects such as pop bottle caps, bolts, washers, nails, tin cans, coins and rifle cartridges.

If they happen across something more appealing on their way to their den, they will drop the first object and pick up or trade for the second object.

If a person were to dissect a woodrat house in the autumn, he or she would find that woodrats generally segregate the items they collect.

One woodrat house yielded more than 2 gallons of hazel nuts, 1½ gallons of wild grapes, a quart of partly dried mushrooms, between 3 and 4 dozen hickory nuts and a score or more sprays of bittersweet berries.

In recent years, woodrats have increased in Kansas. During periods of high population and with more people living in suburban areas, the number of human/woodrat conflicts have increased as well.

Urban Woodrat Problems

Most problems involve woodrats moving into barns or outbuildings or into trucks, cars, tractors, combines and other equipment left in one place for some time.

Woodrats also get under mobile homes as well as in crawl spaces or attics and basements of houses. They will often carry tools away and eat the insulation off electrical wiring.

Laws and Regulations

Kansas law affords some protection to woodrats; however, the rodents can be controlled in Kansas by homeowners, landowners or tenants when woodrats cause property damage.

Problem Management

Exclusion

The first line of defense is to consider the option of exclusion because this offers the long-term solution to the problem. Since woodrats are good climbers, all possible entrances to a building should be closed. No hole larger than one-half inch should be left unsealed. If gnawing is a problem, edges can be covered with sheet metal. To ensure that the woodrat is not trapped inside the building, install a temporary gravity door made of sheet metal hinged at the top. The woodrat can push the door open to exit but cannot re-enter.

Toxicants

Long experience dealing with wood-rat problems suggests that toxicants should not be the only choice of control methods. Woodrats generally pack poison bait back to their den, but may not consume it for some time. This presents the hazard that some other animal might eat the bait.

Urban Wildlife Damage Control

- ☐ Bats, L-855
- ☐ Birds, L-856
- ☐ Blackbirds in Roosts, L-857
- ☐ Cottontail Rabbits, L-858
- ☐ Muskrats, L-859
- ☐ Opossums, L-860
- ☐ Raccoons, L-861
- ☐ Skunks, L-862
- ☐ Tree Squirrels, L-863
- ☐ Snakes, L-864
- ☐ Woodchucks, L-865
- ☐ Woodpeckers, L-866
- ■ **Woodrats, L-867**

Anticoagulant paraffin bait blocks have been used successfully for woodrat control. The bait blocks can be wired in place to prevent the woodrat from packing it away.

Most woodrat problems inside of structures can be solved using traps. The standard rat-sized snap trap has been used to catch woodrats. Its best to tie or glue the bait to the trigger. Baits include nut meats, bacon rind or dried fruit. Pre-baiting will improve trapping success. Put bait on the traps without setting the trap, feeding the woodrats for several days, then set the trap. This is the meaning of "pre-baiting."

Cage-type live traps are very successful in capturing woodrats. Both single and double door cage traps work well for woodrats. The trap size needs to be 5" x 5" x 15". The same baits can be used, but other baits include shiny objects, like a ball of tinfoil hung from a string inside the trap, back beyond the trigger of the trap.

Place these traps along trails, near the nests or against walls wherever you suspect or see the woodrats. The home range of individual woodrats is normally about 100 feet in diameter. The ranges of individuals often overlap since several rats may nest close together. Woodrats are not as numerous as Norway rats. A person may need to catch only one or two woodrats to stop the damage.

Glue Boards

Sometimes under a car hood, it is difficult to properly set most kinds of traps. A glue board can work in these situations. A glue board is a tray, made either of cardboard or plastic that has very sticky glue in it. When the woodrat, or other small animal, crosses the glue surface, the rat gets stuck.

Glue boards tend to lose their effectiveness in dusty areas and during periods of extreme temperature. These conditions may affect the tackiness of the adhesive.

The woodrat will not die immediately when trapped on a glue board. In any of these traps, woodrats can be killed by drowning. Remember, all traps and glue boards must be placed so that children, pets and nontarget animals do not have access to the traps. Glue can be broken down with vegetable oil, freeing anything caught in the glue.

Once the problem woodrats have been removed, it is a good idea to consider rodent-proofing the place where the damage occurred and looking for nearby nests and destroying them, if practical. This may reduce re-invasion by other woodrats.

For further information contact Animal Damage Control, 131 Call Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506-1600 (785) 532-5734.

The figure of the woodrat on page 1 is reprinted from The Wild Mammals of Missouri by Charles W. and Elizabeth R. Schwartz, by permission of the University of Missouri Press. Cop;yright 1981 by the Curators of the University of Missouri.

Charles Lee
Wildlife Specialist

Kansas State University Agricultural Experiment Station and Cooperative Extension Service

L-867 October 1992