

Why rats are a pest

Rats pose a risk to our homes, health and the environment.

They will eat almost anything including stored food, plants, grains and other seeds and even dead animals. Native species are also targeted including lizards, insects, birds and their eggs.

Rats eat native seeds, preventing forest regeneration and compete with birds for food. They also form a key part of the diets of (and attract) larger predators like ferrets and stoats.

As well as affecting the environment, rats can spread serious diseases harmful to human and animals.

They can also damage building materials and even create fire hazards by chewing plastic insulation on electrical wiring.

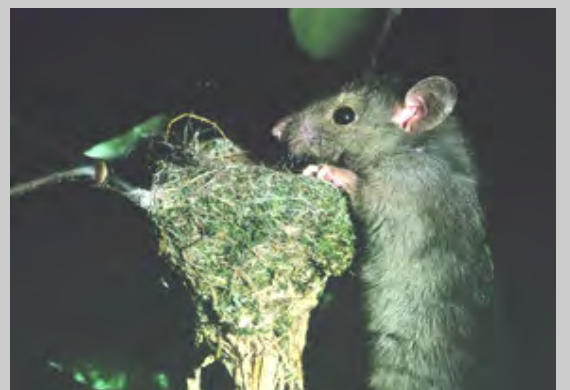
Although wild rats typically live just 12 to 18 months, they are prolific breeders able to produce up to 10 young every month.

Controlling rats



The three options to control rats include:

- poison
- traps
- environment modification



Insects and bird eggs and young are easy targets for a rat.

Poisons

Always read the label before using poison. Make sure you follow instructions and understand the symptoms of accidental poisoning and how to treat it.

- Most rat poisons are anticoagulants that require poisoned bait to be eaten over several days. Rats die in five to 10 days.
- Remember to lay baits in secure places away from children and pets.
- Bait stations can be used to protect non-target animals (family pets, birds, etc) and also shield the poison itself from the weather.
- Baits should be placed along walls or in ceilings if rats are present. If targeting rats outside, place baits near 'runs' or burrows.

Poisoning tips

- Early winter to mid-spring is the best time to poison rats as food sources are scarce, but they can be targeted year-round.
- Rat populations can recover to pre-poisoning numbers in just 9-12 months, so a regular poisoning programme is advisable.
- The longer and more often bait is put out, the more likely the rats are to become 'bait shy', so it's important to change baits.
- Most rat poisons don't produce any signs of poisoning for several days.

Note:

Rat poison can be extremely harmful to dogs and cats. Symptoms can take several days to appear. They may include lack of appetite, lethargy, bleeding from the nose or mouth and pale gums). Call your vet immediately if an animal accidentally eats bait.

In case of accidental human consumption please contact the National Poisons Centre on 0800 764 766 for advice.

Bait stations

These can be bought from most hardware and farm supply stores or made out of a piece of drainage pipe or similar material.

- The bait station should be about 50 cm long and large enough for the rat—but not non-target animals—to walk inside.
- Fix the tube to the ground or tree branch using U-shaped wire.
- Place 4 -6 pellets in each bait station. Bait is best fixed to the bait station with wire to prevent rats taking the poison away.
- Rats only need to eat a small quantity of poison for it to work. It can take about a week for a poisoned the rat to die.
- Remove any mouldy or wet bait.
- Bait stations should be placed at 50 metre intervals along the ground or on a tree.
- Make sure pets or domestic stock do not have access to your bait stations.
- Check bait stations regularly.

For further information on poisons, please see our factsheet: 'Anticoagulant poisons for rats and possums—Your questions answered'.



Photo sources Department of Conservation

Traps

These are most suitable for small rat infestations, particularly in buildings where use of poison will result in smell as the dead rats rot.

- Traps are available from supermarkets and hardware stores.
- Traps need to be checked regularly.

Controlling rats in large areas

The best option for control in large areas is poison in bait stations.

If you are also carrying out possum control you can use a possum bait which is also effective on rats.

Remember if there are a lot of other food sources available—or too few bait stations—you will not get good control.

Modifying the environment

- Remove any cover that might harbour rats, including long grass or rubbish.
- Remove potential food sources or store them in rat-proof containers.
- Rat-proofing buildings will greatly reduce internal infestations from recurring.



Types of rat

There are three types of rat in New Zealand:

- Norway rat (*Rattus norvegicus*)
- Ship rat (*Rattus rattus*)
- Kiore or Polynesian rat (*Rattus exulans*)

The Ship and Norway rats are widespread throughout Northland, while the Kiore is now only found on Stewart Island and a few offshore islands.

Both Ship and Norway rats are common on farms in barns and sheds where food is available.

	Ship rat <i>Rattus rattus</i>	Norway rat <i>Rattus norvegicus</i>
		
Other names	Roof rat, black rat, bush rat, European house rat	Brown rat, water rat, sewer rat, puhawaiki
Habitat	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The most widespread of New Zealand's three rat species. Will live anywhere food is available • Common on farms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Near water, both fresh and salt; in buildings with suitable nesting conditions, on farms and where food is processed or stored
Features	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Smaller than the Norway rat • Has a sleek body with pointed muzzle and large eyes and ears • Its tail is longer than its body and dark all round • Three main coat colours—black, slate grey and tawny brown with grey or yellow stomachs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thick tail shorter than body and pale underneath • Largest of the rats weighing 150-500g. • It has a short body with thick coarse hair • Grey-ish brown colour on the back and pale grey underneath
Key behaviour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Superb climber • Does not dig burrows • Omnivorous 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Digs burrows by water, or beneath rocks and tree roots • Omnivorous • These rats can jump 80cm high, 120cm across and swim up to 600m • There may be well-worn 'runs' connecting feeding areas with burrows
Key impacts	Ship rats are excellent climbers and pose the greatest threat to our native wildlife as they are the main predator of small forest birds	Preys on ground-nesting birds

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