

Species Fact Sheet: Common Rat (*Rattus norvegicus*)



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Quick Facts

Recognition: Greyish-brown fur; prominent pointed muzzle, long and scaly tail, about as long as the head-and-body. Much larger than any mice, but comparable with the much darker, shorter-tailed Water Vole in general size, though less 'chubby' in appearance.

Size: Head & body 21-29cm, tail 17-23cm.

Weight: 40g at weaning, up to 600g, but usually 200-300g.

Lifespan: Few survive longer than 1 year in the wild but can live for around 4-6 years in captivity.



Distribution & Habitat

Common rats occupy a wide range of lowland habitats, often associated with human sites, especially farms, industrial sites, rubbish tips, allotments, and sewers. This reflects their preference for sites that provide an abundance of food, especially cereals and waste human food. Though they sometimes may live in fields, hedgerows and on seashores in summer, they often move into farmyards in winter.

General Ecology

Behaviour

The common rat is a native of central Asia and was introduced to the British Isles around 1720. It has subsequently spread throughout the British Isles, and indeed much of the temperate World, carried especially by humans in ships.

Common rats are not territorial, but live in loose colonies with a hierarchy determined largely by size and age. There seem to be small family groups within the colony. Rats dig their own burrows, and entrances are usually joined by obvious well-used runs. In hedgerows, the males may have ranges averaging 600m, and females 340m, but in food stores may be as small as 65m.

Diet and Feeding

The brown rat is a true omnivore and will consume almost anything, but cereals form a substantial part of its diet. Surplus animal feed, including the fallout from bird feeders, often attracts them. Though cereals are particularly important, they eat a wide range of plant and animal food. Foraging behaviour is often population-specific, and varies by environment and food source. Examples have been found of rats eating birds and diving for molluscs where the food source is abundant.

Reproduction

Reproduction is observed all year round in human dwellings. Females can begin to breed at 3-4 months old, and if food is readily available may breed continuously, but typically have five litters a year. Litter size increases from around 6 in young females weighing 150g, to 11 in females of 500g, but the maximum recorded is 22. The young are born blind and hairless, but their eyes open at 6 days, and they are weaned at about 3 weeks. Young rats can be important food for owls, and many carnivores, including polecats, stoats and foxes, take substantial numbers of rats.

Conservation status

The minimum GB pre-breeding population is 6.5 million, not including urban habitats such as sewers, rubbish tips and industrial premises where the population is reported to be continually rising. Attempts to control rat populations by poisoning may result in negative impacts on other wildlife populations. As an alien, a major pest of stored foodstuffs, and the carrier of various human diseases (including Weil's disease and plague), the common rat is persecuted rather than conserved.