



# LIVING WITH... RATS & MICE



Brown rat

This guide focuses on the four species most commonly found in homes or gardens: the house mouse, wood mouse, yellow-necked mouse and brown rat.

Rodents are the most diverse order of mammals on earth and can be found on every continent. There are 17 species of rodent found in Britain, ranging from the tiny harvest mouse to the bulky beaver. Other than mice and rats, there are 6 species of vole (the bank, Skomer, water, field, Guernsey and Orkney vole), 2 species of squirrel (the red and grey squirrel) and a single species of beaver (the Eurasian beaver).

Only 2 species of rat live within Britain (the brown rat and the black rat). By comparison, there are 4 species of mice (the wood mouse, yellow-necked mouse, house mouse and harvest mouse) and 2 species of dormouse (the hazel dormouse and fat dormouse). Although naturally nocturnal, those species living in proximity to humans are known to appear regularly during the day.

Rodents are prolific breeders and the species identified in this guide can produce anywhere from 15-128 young a year; brown rats and house mice in particular will breed throughout the year, whilst yellow-necked and wood mice generally breed between March and October (longer if they have a good food supply).

The **brown rat** (also called the common, street, sewer or wharf rat), was brought to Britain in the early 1700s by ship and quickly became established in the wild. Found throughout Britain, the brown rat is commonly associated with homes and gardens and grows to around 15-27 cm (with a 10-24 cm tail). Greyish-brown in colour, they have a large, slanted head with relatively small ears and an almost hairless tail.

The **black rat** (also called the ship, roof or house rat) is rarely encountered in Britain nowadays and is restricted mainly to seaports, particularly on the Thames Estuary (such as Tilbury, Essex).

The **house mouse** is, as the name would suggest, the species most found in homes or gardens. They can occupy houses at any time of the year throughout Britain, despite the misconception that they only do so during the winter months. Smaller than wood mice at 7-9 cm (body) and 5 cm (tail), house mice come in a range of light to dark-brown shades. Unlike the wood or yellow-necked mouse, the tail of house mice is almost hairless.

Although unusual in buildings except in winter, the **wood mouse** (also known as the field mouse, long-tailed field mouse or common field mouse) is one of the most common and widespread wild rodents in the UK. At 8-10 cm (body) and 7-9 cm (tail), they are a little larger than house mice but can be more readily distinguished by their sandy brown fur, white or grey underside, very large ears and long tail.

**Yellow-necked mice** (also called the yellow-necked field mouse or yellow-necked wood mouse) are restricted to rural areas in central and southern Wales and England (from Staffordshire to Dorset, across to Kent and up to Suffolk). Much larger than other mouse species at 9-12 cm (body) and 7-18 cm (tail), they are very similar in appearance to the wood mouse but can be distinguished by the distinctive band of yellow/orange fur around the neck area, forming a bib on the chest.

Whilst all these species (except the black rat) traditionally live in underground burrow-systems, they are also skilled climbers and even swimmers, allowing them to access multiple habitats (brown rats are known to live in sewers).

**Harvest mice** (the smallest European rodent) and **hazel dormice** are rarely if ever encountered in gardens or homes. In Europe, the **fat dormouse** (also called the edible dormouse) is well documented living in houses and the same has been found to be true in Britain. However, as this non-native species is confined almost exclusively to the Chiltern Hills, encountering them outside this area is unlikely.

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## How can I humanely deter rats and/or mice?

Rats or mice commonly live in gardens and parks in the UK; usually this is due to food sources, such as food put down for other animals. They can be attracted to spilt wild bird food, scattered by birds from feeders or tables. Compost heaps can also be a major attractant as they offer food, shelter and warmth. Other attractants can be improperly stored rubbish bags, cat, dog or other pet food (particularly outside pets like rabbits or guinea pigs) and food left out for wildlife (e.g. hedgehogs).

### IN MY GARDEN:

- Reduce or remove any accessible food sources, and ensure any food containers, bins etc. are airtight and rodent-proof.
- If you feed wildlife, clean up after putting out food and occasionally take a break leaving it out altogether.
- Plant repellents, such as wood hyacinth, allium and daffodils are known to help keep rodents at bay.
- Grass, shrubs and other greenery close to the house should be cropped and kept short, neat and tidy so that it doesn't provide cover. You should relax this as the rodents stop appearing, to ensure it remains a refuge for other wildlife.
- "De-clutter" the spaces and keep any storage areas tidy.
- Rats and mice are 'neophobic' (they have a deep fear of new things or changes), so you should move garden furniture and other objects around your garden; new obstacles will confuse and alarm rodents used to a 'static habitat'.

### Remember:

Once you know an animal is confined in a trap or snare their welfare is governed by the Animal Welfare Act 2006. The person setting the trap has responsibility for their welfare and it is an offence to cause, or fail to prevent, unnecessary suffering to the animal.



Wood mouse

## What do mice and rats eat?

Mice and rats are true omnivores and will eat almost anything; including invertebrates, meat, fish, fruit, berries, plants, buds, vegetables, fungi, bone, eggs and even candles and soap!

By far the most favoured foods however, are seeds (particularly tree seeds) and cereals; it is for this reason that things like spilled bird food often attracts these kinds of rodents.

### IN MY HOUSE:

- Mice and rats need less food than you might think and can live off nothing more than crumbs. Clean overlooked areas of your kitchen where food and crumbs might gather. Make sure your food containers (particularly foods like cereal, bread, pasta and dried pet foods) are sealed, made of rodent-proof materials and not left out, but kept in cupboards and/or on shelves that rodents can't get to. If you have pets, put their food bowls away overnight.
- If you know where the rodents are getting in, or if there are holes you think they might be using, you can block them with either a strong, quick-hardening sealant or 'mouse mesh'; a kind of wire-wool. Remember that caulk, rubber and plastic fillers won't work as rodents can easily chew through them. Pay attention to other areas that they might use to get in, such as badly fitting doors that leave a gap under them.
- Soak cotton wool balls in peppermint, eucalyptus or spearmint oil; rodents have been shown to avoid these smells and by placing these at key points (under cupboards, along work surfaces, along beams and in the corners of lofts, basements or sheds and those areas they may be getting in) you can help keep rats and mice away. Remember to replace the oil regularly, even after they appear to have gone, or they might come back.

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## What is the most humane way to legally control rats and mice?

From an animal welfare point of view, humane deterrence and prevention is always better (see previous page). If a problem has already arisen then it is possible that the correct use of traps may result in less welfare problems than rodenticides. But the humaneness of lethal methods can vary considerably according to how they are used.

### WE WOULD NOT ADVOCATE THE USE OF GLUE TRAPS AS THEY ARE INDISCRIMINATE AND INHUMANE

- In attempting to get free, animals may rip out patches of fur, break bones and even gnaw through their own limbs to escape. After three to five hours, animals have been reported as covered in their own faeces and urine. However, trapped animals may be left for much longer periods than that, during which time they will experience pain, distress and unacceptable suffering. Animals may be left to suffer and die slowly from dehydration, or you may be forced to kill the animal yourself.

### RODENTICIDE POISON IS OFTEN SEEN AS A 'QUICK FIX' BUT THERE ARE SERIOUS WELFARE ISSUES WITH ITS USE:

- Users of rodenticide are legally required to take all reasonable precautions to prevent access to the poison by domestic and wild animals as well as children. In addition to the obvious suffering caused to rodents by rodenticides, there is also the potential risk of secondary poisoning - in which affected rodents are subsequently eaten by other animals, who themselves suffer the effects of the poison (e.g. barn owls).
- In simple terms, the poisons act by disrupting the blood clotting process (the bodies' normal repair process), causing haemorrhage and eventually killing the animal by blood loss and associated effects. These effects include severe muscle pain, joint pain and abdominal pain. Affected animals may show outward signs of pain and distress and it may take days before the anticoagulant takes full effect; the poisons are designed to be slow-acting because as previously mentioned, these animals are 'neophobic' (they have a deep fear of new things or changes).
- The Campaign for Responsible Rodenticide Use (CRRU) has produced [a Code of Best Practice for Rodent Control and the Safe Use of Rodenticides](#) - this document outlines the legislation in place governing the use of rodenticide poison and works to ensure that rodenticides are used correctly and in ways that will minimise their exposure of wildlife.

### ALTHOUGH LIVE-CATCH TRAPS MAY APPEAL TO THOSE WISHING TO AVOID KILLING THEY CAN CAUSE MAJOR WELFARE PROBLEMS:

- It is not unusual for rodents to die in live-catch traps and once such animals are in a trap the person setting the trap would have responsibility for their welfare. The risk of a mouse dying in a trap intended to catch them alive may be reduced if the trap has a large holding compartment and the traps are inspected frequently. One example of the welfare issues resulting from the use of small sized live-catch traps would be when the breath of the rodent causes moisture condensation inside the trap. This wets the animal's fur, making them very cold and leading to potential hypothermia.
- As far as we are aware there has been no study of the outcome of catching rats or mice and releasing them elsewhere. Other rodents show very high mortality rates when translocated to an unfamiliar area. The same is probably likely to be true for many species of rodent: they will be unfamiliar with food sources and places of shelter; they may face aggression and competition from other rodents already occupying territory in the new area and are likely to be more vulnerable to predation.
- Releasing rats or mice singly may affect their survival prospects but retaining them in a trap until a number have been caught is also likely to adversely affect them.

### GOOD QUALITY, CONVENTIONAL BREAK-BACK TRAPS CAN BE USED BUT REQUIRE CARE IN USING PROPERLY:

- If a kill trap is used and the animal is still alive when found, then this creates more of a problem. Certain kill traps are very effective at killing quickly and therefore could be considered humane, but not all traps are effective in what they do. It is therefore very important to look for well built traps that will work properly.
- The pros and cons of live-catch traps vs spring traps are also discussed in [guidelines published by UFAW](#).

**We would advise anyone considering these measures to employ a reputable pest control agency**

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## What is the law about rats and mice? Are they protected?

Rodent species generally do not benefit from legal protection in the UK; only the hazel dormouse (*Muscardinus avellanarius*), water vole (*Arvicola amphibius*) and red squirrel (*Sciurus vulgaris*) are specifically legally protected and a licence must be applied for (from Natural England or Natural Resources Wales) before action can be taken against them.

Please be aware that it is illegal to place traps, snares or poisons in an area where they may catch a fat dormouse (*Glis glis*). If you are trapping rodents using either kill or live-catch traps or rodenticide, you must therefore take precautions against the trapping or killing of any dormouse.

Similarly, traps, snares or poisons laid out for rodents pose a threat to shrew species, who are also protected from being killed or taken by these measures\*.

*\*Shrews can be live-caught and ringed/marked under a Licence issued by either Natural England or Natural Resources Wales. However, this can only be used for scientific, educational or conservation reasons and the licence conditions must be met.*

Once you know an animal is confined in a trap, their welfare is governed by the Animal Welfare Act 2006. This means the person setting the trap has responsibility for their welfare and it is an offence to cause, or fail to prevent, unnecessary suffering to the animal.



Yellow-necked mouse

Alternatively, it is an offence to release certain species, such as the black rat (*Rattus rattus*) or fat dormouse (*G. glis*) into the wild (except under licence); this means that the use of a live-catch trap in relocating such a rodent would constitute an offence.

## I found a baby mouse or rat, what should I do?

If you find a baby rodent alone or out of its nest which is **hairless**, its **eyes are closed** or its **parents are known to be dead**, call the RSPCA on the number below.

If the young animal is active, mobile, furred and with eyes open, the best thing to do is leave it alone.

## What should I do if I find a rodent nest?

If possible, leave the nest as it is and bear in mind that the nest may belong to a legally protected species.



House mouse

To report an injured or sick rodent to the RSPCA please ring the 24-hour cruelty and advice line on **0300 1234 999**