

Feral Rodents: Prevention and Control

Feral rats and mice are some of the most adaptable and versatile animals on the planet. They're also one of the greatest risks to public health as they may carry and transmit serious diseases such as a plague, dysentery, leptospirosis and typhus fever. Therefore it is the responsibility of all public members to control feral rodents on their properties/premises to ensure the health and wellbeing of the wider community.

The Issue with Rodents

Feral rodents can be responsible for;

- Carrying and spreading diseases;
- Contaminating food with their hair, droppings or urine potentially causing food poisoning/spoilage;
- Generating unpleasant odours;
- Carrying fleas and ticks which may be harmful to humans or pets; and
- Damaging materials such as food containers, fabrics, wood, insulations and wiring.

Identifying Feral Rodents

Common feral rodents in WA are the Black rat (*Rattus rattus*), the Brown rat (*Rattus norvegicus*) and the House mouse (*Mus musculus*). Native Australian rodents such as Hopping mice pose little to no threat to public health therefore, should **not** be controlled as they are a protected species.

To identify the difference between feral rats, mice and native mice, feral rats are typically grey, brown or black and larger than mice, reaching up to 25 cm in body length and 400 g in weight. Feral mice are typically white, grey, brown or black and smaller than rats reaching only 10 cm in body length and 30 g in weight.

Hopping Mice can be identified by their large feet and typical brush tip on the tail. They also move with a hopping or galloping gait. Please see Figure 1 for imagery of a hopping mouse.



Figure 1: Hopping mice have large feet, a long brush tip tail and are a protected species

Identifying a Rodent Infestation

Rodents are generally more active at night and are more common in late summer/early autumn. If you see rats or mice during the day this usually indicates high numbers or that there is a good food supply nearby.

When inspecting for an infestation look for:

- Black, moist, thin droppings;
- Debris left from rodents gnawing items like snail shells, almond shells and chop bones;
- Food left for pets which has gone missing;
- Signs of gnawing damage on fruit and vegetables or materials such as wood, insulation, fabrics and electrical cable;
- 'Runways' which have formed when rodents have used the same path, such as through vegetation/gardens or along walls; Greasy rub marks on walls or skirting boards where rodents travel regularly;
- Burrow holes close to sheds or under debris;
- Listen for pet dogs, cats and birds being more excitable than usual; and
- You may hear squeaking, gnawing or movement noises in walls, cupboards, ceiling and under floors.

Rats and mice will take shelter in many places such as houses, sheds, garages and gardens, particularly:

- In walls, ceilings and under floors;
- Behind or under cupboards or bathtubs;
- Behind boxes, machinery and furniture;
- In rubbish heaps, wood piles, thick vegetation, animal enclosures, paper or cloth; and
- In holes under buildings

Non-chemical Control Methods

Non-chemical control methods include trapping and maintaining an environment which is not suitable to the harbourage of pests around your home or on your premises.

Trapping

Mouse and rat traps differ in size and strength therefore it is important that the type of rodent is identified and the proper trap used. Traps can be purchased from hardware stores and supermarkets.

When setting traps:

- Several traps should be used at any one time;
- Traps should not be set near food preparation areas;
- Place traps across 'runways' for a few days before setting to allow rodents to become used to the traps;
- Traps can be successfully set with bacon, peanut butter, fish, meat, bread or chocolate;
- Check traps daily, remove any dead rodents and refresh the bait;
- Use an insecticidal surface spray around the immediate area to kill any fleas which may leave a trapped rodent body.



Figure 2: Traps such as this are a humane option for those uncomfortable with other traps and can also prevent harm coming to native species such as the Hopping mouse

Environment

Rodents are well adapted to living in human environments therefore to reduce the numbers on your property:

- Dispose of food scraps promptly and clean food preparation areas thoroughly;
- Inspect living and working areas for potential rodent entrances and block them where possible with concrete, hard setting filler, steel wool or heavy gauge sheet metal;
- Ensure rubbish bins have tight fitting lids and are regularly emptied;
- Keep your home and property clear of rubbish;
- Keep stacked materials such as wood and bricks at least 30 cm above ground to minimise hiding/nesting/thoroughfares of rats and mice;
- Regularly clean out sheds, storage areas and dispose of unwanted items; and
- Remove unwanted undergrowth – cut back grass, trees, bushes and creepers which may provide cover or access to rooftop.

Chemical Control Methods

Chemical control should only be considered as part of a broader control program of eliminating food sources and rodent harbourage. Chemical control is generally short-term and rodents will return if food and shelter are still available. If you do decide to use a chemical control method you should consider:

- If rodents die and decay in hard to reach places they may cause an offensive odour;
- Pets and children may eat toxic baits or poisoned rodent bodies;
- Some individuals are sensitive to rodent control chemicals in their environment;



Figure 3: Racumin is one of the many anticoagulation rodenticides available on the market in paste or blocks

- Rat poisons or rodenticides containing an anticoagulant are the best choice as secondary poisoning from the consumption of poisoned rodents is unlikely to occur. Should primary or secondary poisoning of pets or children occur then treatment is obtainable; however
- **Extreme care must be taken when using poisons** (read instructions carefully) to prevent danger of children or pets being accidentally poisoned. Baits should be placed in locations away from open spaces that cannot be accessed by children or pets.

If you have questions regarding chemical control measures or are uncomfortable using chemical baits, contact a licensed pest control operator.

Disposal of Dead Rodents

Dead rodents should be carefully removed from areas where pets or native animals may access them. Dead rodents can be buried or wrapped and placed into domestic rubbish bins. Gloves should be worn when handling wild rodents. Remember to wash your hands with warm water and soap immediately after handling any dead rodents.

Protecting Yourself

If rodents are present:

- Secure all foodstuffs in sealed containers;
- Throw away food or drink that may have come into contact with rodents;
- Wash cookware and cutlery in warm water and detergent before use;
- Wash hands thoroughly before preparing food, eating, drinking or smoking;
- Wear shoes and do not lie or sleep in areas where rodents have been active; and
- If you are bitten by a rat or mouse, consult your doctor promptly.

Shire Involvement

Under public and environmental health legislation, it is the responsibility of owners and occupiers of premises to prevent rodents from living and breeding on their property. Your local shire can provide advice on pest control and may provide rodent baiting services or loan traps.

Shires can investigate rodent infestations following complaints or upon finding evidence of rodent infestation or conditions likely to attract them and may enforce a cleanup of possible food sources and nesting sites.