

## **You Dirty Rat!!**

### **AGRI-VIEWS**

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

Based on observations and conversations, it appears that rodents did well this year which may mean there are some challenges ahead for area residents in the weeks and months ahead. While mice getting into homes are a nuisance, what most homeowners really don't want to have to deal with is the eastern woodrat, a.k.a the "pack rat". Woodrats are well known for their desire to pack away many different things, but they can also be very destructive, getting up into the engine compartments of vehicles where they will chew and remove various segments of electrical wiring.

Like many of other the small rodents in this state, woodrats are primarily vegetarians eating leaves of plants as well as fruit, berries, bark, tubers, nuts, mushrooms and plant buds. While they may pack off grain, especially poison grain baits, they don't eat that much grain. In fact there are a lot of items that we might consider food for a woodrat that will get hauled back to their den that they will never eat!

When you mention rat, most people will immediately think of the Norway rat with it's scaly hairless tail, coarse hair and good size. An adult Norway rat can easily reach one pound in weight and nearly two feet in length, with tail. Eastern woodrats are general 14 to 17 inches long, weigh 10 to 14 ounces, have fine soft fur and a hairy tail. They have large ears and have often been described as "cute", although not by me!

Woodrats build rather large dens made of sticks which if left undisturbed, may be used by multiple generations for years. A careful dismantling of one of these dens can turn up a lot of very interesting items that were scavenged and brought back to the den. These dens are often under a tree or even slightly off the ground in a tree. They can be fairly small or they can be several feet tall and several feet in diameter. Other species may make use of woodrat dens for shelter on a short term basis.

With most rodents, trapping or using poison baits are the typical way of dealing with them. Unfortunately, woodrats often will take baits, especially pellet baits, back to the den and cache it without ever eating it. If you try to use poisons you will want to use larger block types that can be wired in place or use finely ground or meal type baits which are more likely to be eaten instead of hauled away.

For most people, trapping with a standard rat trap is usually the most effective method. I will frequently use a couple of rat traps and bait one with peanut butter and the second trap I'll wrap the trigger with aluminum foil. Bright shiny objects often get their attention faster than food!

When it some to dealing with rodents I'm not a fan of "non-lethal" techniques, mainly because they frequently don't work. There are no effective repellents labeled for woodrat control. Mothballs may work for a short period of time if you have a fully enclosed location. Two techniques that some homeowners have reported success with to minimize damage to vehicles are to leave the hood up on cars overnight or to place a light under the hood at night. The theory in both cases is to make the engine compartment feel less safe to the woodrat. Whatever method you use, perseverance will be needed to have success in dealing with those "dirty rats!"