

Vertebrate Pests: How do woodrats/packrats get into an attic when there isn't any obvious access route and now how do I get them out?

It may seem like these animals enter your home by magic, but there are ways to find the access points to your property, especially since these rodents tend to follow defined runways. These runways can be found in dusty areas by looking for footprints. If you suspect a runway but don't have any dusty areas, try sprinkling flour or something similar to help you see the tracks. Outside, look for a gnawed hole around the building or foundation. Sometimes you'll see a grease smudge that the animal leaves when it travels close to a wall, around a beam, or through a hole. Finally, you can look for the droppings. If they are soft and moist, that's a reliable telltale sign that the trail is fresh.

These animals don't need a large point of entry at all; just 2-3 inches for a rat, even smaller for a mouse. Any place it can get its teeth into and gnaw, it can create an entry hole, so consider the following suggestions to help keep these rodents away from your property:

Stop entry

- Seal openings around pipes and floor drains and keep drains tightly covered.
- Cover edges subject to gnawing such as door bottoms, with heavy sheet metal or wire mesh.
- Place metal rat guards on pipes, wires, and other places they might climb.
- Cover other openings with 19-gauge or heavier hardware cloth with ¼ inch or less mesh.

Get rid of exterior hiding spots

- Eliminate dense vegetation and rubbish around your structures.
- Raise woodpiles at least 8 inches above ground on pallets; 18 inches is better.
- Avoid planting ground covers such as ivy, near your structures.

Remove food sources

- Eliminate food and water sources and store your own pet's feed in rodent-proof containers.
- Dispose of garbage and other waste in tightly covered metal cans.
- Never feed outside pets more than they can eat in one sitting.
- Clean up pet droppings (rats do very nicely on a straight diet of feces.)
- Clean up windfall fruits, nuts, and ornamental seedpods.
- Don't scatter food for birds and squirrels on the ground.

Rat poisons

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There are rat-killing baits you can purchase at local gardening and hardware centers. Each one has pros and cons and you have to decide what you can adhere to safely after reading the labels and giving it thoughtful consideration. Remember these are poisons. All can be safe as long as you read the label and follow the directions.

If you find rats in the daytime, you have a serious infestation, since they are normally nocturnal animals. This might be beyond what you can eliminate on your own. Clackamas and Multnomah Counties have Vector Control Departments that will actually help you get rid of the pests; Washington County does not. However, if you're in Washington County and you call one of the counties that does have a Vector Control Department, they will often direct you to a reliable pest control service. You can also check out the Yellow Pages under "Pest Control Services" and call for estimates, while making sure to ask if they are licensed and bonded before contracting for their services.

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