

Poisoning a rat turns into bittersweet victory Pest's demise causes shame, as creature suffered slow death

Arrol Gellner

Saturday, February 24, 2007

Recently, in the midst of a remodel that's left lots of holes in our kitchen walls, we had an uninvited guest - a dark-brown Norway rat that, on the first night alone, helped itself to a pretty impressive chunk of watermelon and also carried off the rubberized lids of my toddler's sippy cups.

Taking the easy way out, we decided to move all the edibles into the dining room for the duration of the project. That worked for a while, until one day when we noticed some big holes gnawed in a bunch of bananas. Somehow, our friend had invited itself in.

On double-checking the room, I found a rat-worthy opening high on one wall, and I confidently covered it with plywood. Still, the next morning my wife found that her tote bag had been rifled, with her stash of crackers and an apple carried away whole to who knows where.

Reluctantly, I went to the drugstore and bought a rat trap and -- in case all else failed -- a box of rat poison. I baited the trap with cheese, as I learned to do from cartoons, and then set it in the dining room. The next morning, it was sprung but empty, the cheese lying beside it.

The following night, I tried again with some raisin bread. Again I found the trap sprung but empty, though this time the raisin bread was gone. A third try brought similar non-results.

Defeated, I finally reached for the rat poison, setting out the little tray of deadly kibble where the rat would find it most tempting. Poisoning a rat, mind you, is not a speedy proposition.

Rodenticides now use an active ingredient called brodifacoum, which, without getting into the unpleasant details, works by interfering with the body's production of vitamin K. This slowly prevents the blood from clotting and eventually makes the capillary walls permeable, with ghastly results I'll leave to your imagination.

According to the product label, dead rats "will begin appearing" four or five days after eating the pellets. Sure enough, we didn't hear from our unwelcome lodger again until midnight on the fifth day, when I was awakened by thumping noises coming from the dining room. As I approached, I heard little rat feet padding away quickly.

Creeping inside and switching on the light, I found a scarlet bloodstain at each doorway where the rat had tried to escape despite his failing body. Now it was hiding beneath a cabinet, making quiet gurgling and whimpering noises so pitiable I couldn't stand to hear them. I went back to bed, feeling a little poisoned myself.

The next morning, I was prepared for the revolting sight you'd expect when you consign such an unloved creature to a slow death by hemorrhage. But I wasn't prepared for what I actually found. In its last long

miserable hours, the rat had sought out the most comforting thing it could find -- a small stuffed bear my son had left lying under the table, with fur a color close to his own.

Now it lay still on its side pressed against it, looking not revolting as a rat is supposed to, but as silent, soft and harmless as the little toy it clung to. As for me, the nominal victor in this lopsided battle, I felt not triumph, but only plain shame at having made a fellow creature suffer so horribly, simply for being too good at the things Mother Nature designed it for.

We like to think that we control our built environment, and perhaps we do -- briefly. Brodifacoum is now widely used in rat poison because rats have become resistant to the previous common rodenticide, called warfarin. No doubt they'll still be nimbly adapting to their world long after we humans have done ours in.

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SFGate.com**LETTERS TO HOME & GARDEN**

Saturday, March 3, 2007

Kudos for Como

Editor -- What an engaging article from Steven Winn on the ongoing journey of a "street dog" into the heart of a family (Feb. 24).

Outward appearances notwithstanding, one gets the feeling that both Winn and Como are beginning to place each other right up there at the "pretty wonderful" end of "fine."

VICKI TIERNAN and LULA

(who thinks everyone in the world is very fine)

San Francisco

Rat death empathy

Editor -- The article ("Poisoning a rat turns into bittersweet victory," Arrol Gellner, Feb. 24) on rat poisoning broke my heart.

No animal should have to suffer like this. Even if you don't care about the rats, poisoning them is a bad idea.

As a veterinary nurse, I see many cases of pets being poisoned, sometimes fatally, by rat bait. I am sure young children are at risk for this, too, because the bait is made to taste sweet. The author is lucky his rat came out in the open to die.

Often, the rats die behind the walls, and when the smell becomes unbearable, the walls must be knocked down to remove the rotting bodies.

A better option is the humane Havahart trap, which you can borrow from your local humane society. These have worked well for me.

Celia damon**Berkeley**

Editor -- Thank you for the article about Arrol Gellner's sadness at the agonizing death of a rat in his home. At www.hungryowl.org, there's an article about owls dying from rat poison. An owl family, over the course of one season, can eat 3,000 rodents. They can do this only if they have not been killed by eating a poisoned rat.

Jean kronfield

Mill Valley

Editor -- Wow! What an amazingly sensitive article. Arrol Gellner's skill as a writer obviously extends well beyond the domain of architecture. We know several people who read it and all were as deeply affected as we were. Thank you for piercing the veil and allowing us to see, for a brief moment, the beauty beneath the surface.

Without being didactic or proselytizing, Gellner has succeeded, I suspect, in moving the most intractable of people from seeing a rat as ugly and foul to perceiving it as a creature that, like all life-forms, is essentially mysterious and sacred, and not unlike our "higher" life-forms, has basic needs for comfort.

Craig Iyal

Oakland

Editor -- I was very moved by Arrol Gellner's story about his experience with killing a rat and seeing it suffer, something he didn't plan on.

Although I certainly do not want rats to freeload in my home, I have come to realize that they, like any living creature, want to survive. No malice, no evil -- they're just trying to get by. Sometimes we make it too easy for them, it's true. And sometimes they can do harm, yes. But mostly they are just looking to get through the day.

I once hired a pest control agency to rid my home of ants. The service person said he could also set traps for rats that had been seen on the slope in the backyard.

These rats were not bothering us, but the service guy said he could "get them" before they had a chance to "invade" our home. He also said he could spray my yard for other insects, at which point I had to stop him.

This fear-based approach can go a long way in getting people onboard (see: our current administration) for a cause, but if we can regard other creatures as more than stains that need to be rubbed out, we may be that much closer to finding some sort of personal, and perhaps global, peace by having compassion for one being at a time.

That rat may have been one of Gellner's best teachers.

Christine okon

San Francisco

Editor -- The article by Arrol Gellner was a cruel and explicit essay on the suffering and death of a rat. I continued reading in hopes of finding the author ending his essay with a suggestion to use humane controls, such as a Havahart. But, no, he concluded his essay only by commenting that, basically, rats will perhaps eventually be immune to brodifacoum. Why is an architect writing about his experience about catching a rat anyway? Why is he using poisons in his house while there is a toddler present? These types

of essays concerning so-called pests should be exclusively in the Bug Man's section. And with Richard Fagerlund, we all know that he would have sought an alternative way to catch the critter and not elaborate on the critter's death process.

S. bailey

Fairfax

Editor -- Last year, we, too, had a persistent rat in our El Sobrante home, which gnawed and invaded countless areas, and which was resistant to the standard rat traps, as was Gellner's specimen.

I had long ruled out poison, as we have dogs and cats (the latter being sufficiently geriatric that they were unable to deal with the rat), and, finally, I spent \$60 on a Victor Electronic Rat Trap.

It is a simple but efficient device that uses ordinary alkaline batteries and is like a small house into which you bait the rat using peanut butter or some other food. As the rat enters, it steps on an electrode on the floor of the unit and when it reaches the food, it encounters the second electrode. Zap! It is instantly electrocuted. The batteries apparently charge a capacitor inside the trap, which delivers a charge high enough to kill a rat, but, if a human were to complete the circuit, only a shock would be administered. These traps come in "rat size" (such as we used) and "mouse size," which are smaller and use AA batteries instead of the D batteries required by the larger unit.

The morning after we set the rat trap, we found the critter, peacefully lying inside the trap, unmarked, but quite dead. I felt qualms of regret, also, as really, this creature was, in its own way, a beautiful and intelligent animal. But if I am going to have to dispatch such creatures, critters, this is the humane way to do it.

I recommend this unit highly.

Robert a. fink

El Sobrante

Editor -- I would like to suggest that Gellner use spring-loaded traps, little flat pieces of wood that have a spring-loaded arm that slams down on the guy. A quick kill. This, I believe, is the most humane, and using peanut butter is the key.

We no longer have rats, but once did before we concreted our basement.

Diane andrews hall

San Francisco

Editor -- I'm concerned that Arrol Gellner's article might encourage some readers who may be indifferent to a rodent's suffering to use brodifacoum (or any other blood thinner) on account of its undeniable effectiveness.

Regardless of where the rat may have eaten the poison, if it manages to die outside (or anywhere that a cat can go) -- and even a dying rat can be resourceful -- its corpse may be eaten by neighborhood cats or other predators, which will, in turn, become sick and die.

A neighbor of mine poisoned some roof rats in his yard, then marveled that the owls, which had frequented his trees, were no longer evident. And the rat problem has increased. An owl eats rodents.

Years ago, when I was raising chickens, I had a rat problem that I managed to solve with traps baited with peanut butter and hummus, and by discovering and destroying their trails.

You might find the following Associated Press dispatch interesting:
www.taipeitimes.com/News/world/archives/2004/09/30/2003204980.

Traps may be frustratingly inefficient but are not a potential danger to pets and predators.

Paul drabkin

Richmond

Editor -- I want to thank Arrol Gellner for his touching article regarding the use of rat poison.

The Environmental Protection Agency is considering restricting the use of some rat poisons, including brodifacoum, so that it would no longer be available over the counter.

Here is a link to more information: www.api4animals.org/actionalerts?p=1053&more=1

Monica engebretson

Project director

Animal Protection Institute

Sacramento

Editor -- This is an appalling story. First, baiting a rat trap is best done with a tough piece of bacon the rat can't pull out easily or a walnut firmly placed under the bait holder. Rats run along the wall for safety, so traps should be placed on the floor against the wall.

The other tragic aspect of poisoning any pest is the possibility that dogs and other creatures could be poisoned by finding and eating a dead rat.

One of my dogs almost died from symptoms of rat poison here in the Rockridge district of Oakland. I have found desiccated rat carcasses under wood in my garage and yard several times. I think this indicates that the animals were poisoned. I know from experience that baiting a rat trap correctly is not too difficult.

Anne gomes

Oakland

Editor -- I wish Gellner had recalled (or seen) the movie "Seven Years in Tibet," in which, to the chagrin of Heinrich Harrer, the young Dalai Lama requires monks to remove and relocate earthworms from the ground before proceeding with a construction project.

The question is not (as was said more than 100 years ago) whether animals can think but whether they can suffer.

I don't wish Arrol Gellner ill, but I sincerely hope his nagging sense of guilt continues long enough to persuade him to take a more humane attitude toward all life. Our attitudes toward animals (whether rats, whales or dolphins) reflect our attitudes toward all life.

I am a practicing Buddhist, and one of our tenets is to treat every life form with deep respect because it "could have been your mother in a previous life."

I respect Gellner's honesty.

Bill shea

Cupertino

Natural pest control

Editor -- Regarding the article "Gardeners save the day as butterfly habitats disappear" (Feb. 17), the average organic garden is naturally teeming with beneficial arthropods such as native lady beetles, predatory bugs, syrphid flies, parasitic wasps, lacewings and a wide variety of spiders.

These native helpers are an ideal method of pest control, both environmentally safe and free of cost. Spiders and beneficial insects, like any animal, need a favorable habitat to thrive; that is, a garden with plants and flowers that provide moisture, shelter, alternative prey and the immediate nutrition from nectar (carbohydrates) and pollen (protein).

We might call these plants beneficial because they attract and nurture beneficial insects. There are both native and exotic beneficial plants, but they tend to fall into a few plant families. Because most beneficial insects are rather small and spend a great deal of energy looking for prey, they tend to favor plants with horizontal inflorescences (landing platforms with food), especially the carrot family (Apiaceae), the buckwheat family (Polygonaceae), the sunflower family (Asteraceae, especially those with large disc flowers and small ray flowers), the Scabiosa family (Dipsacaceae), elderberries, oaks and several others.

Spiders require permanent shelters, such as coarse ground covers and half-buried rocks. Also, all amphibians are predators, so water elements are especially important in the garden.

Designing the plants and hardscape of a habitat garden is both fun and challenging. We all need to understand that there is more to a garden than just aesthetics.

Properly designed, it can also have considerable ecological value for our residential neighborhoods.

Richard merrill

Professor emeritus,

horticulture

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Aptos

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