

The Nature of Teller
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Bushy-Tailed Woodrats

After several conversations relating to woodrats (also known as pack rats, or trade rats), I thought it would be a good focus for this month's article. There are six species of woodrats in Colorado, although the only one found in Teller County is the bushy-tailed woodrat (*Neotoma cinerea*). Unfortunately, it is also the largest of the six species, growing up to 16 inches (including their tail) and weighing 11 ounces! Its flat, hairy tail, long, full whiskers, large hairless ears, protruding eyes, and size make it easy to recognize.

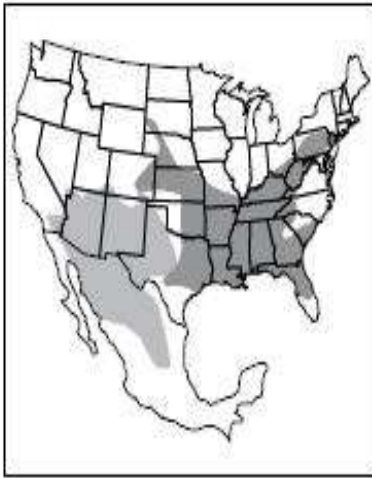


Fig. 2. Range of the eastern (dark) and whitethroat woodrats (light) in North America.

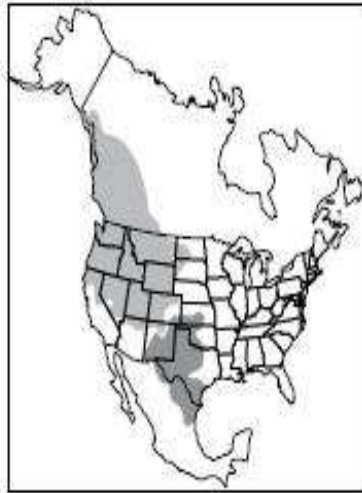


Fig. 3. Range of the southern plains (dark) and bushytail woodrats (light) in North America.



Fig. 4. Range of the Mexican (dark) and desert woodrats (light) in North America.

As the name implies, they have a tendency to pack away small objects such as jewelry, utensils, can tabs, and other items. If a woodrat finds something desirable, they will drop what they are currently carrying, and "trade" it for the new item. They are particularly fond of shiny objects, leading to tales of rats swapping jewelry for a stone.

The cold and snow may drive them from their more exposed homes, to under our porches, abandoned vehicles, or in sparsely used cabins and campers. Obviously this can lead to damage and nuisance issues.

The breeding period occurs from January to August, peaking between March and June. Generally they have one litter per year, although two have been observed in longer periods of warmth. Litter size ranging from 1 to 6, with an average of four.

Bushy-tailed woodrats are primarily nocturnal and are most active during the half hour after sunset and at dawn, year-round. They inhabit areas from sea level to 14,110 feet and are most often associated with high mountain habitats. They primarily associate with ponderosa pine, Douglas-fir, spruce, and quaking aspen forests...in other words, Teller County!

Shelter and topography are important determinants of habitat suitability. The availability of rock shelters may be a more important than the associated plant communities. Hollow trees, logs, dwarf mistletoe brooms, and coarse woody debris may also be used for denning, foraging, and shelter. And, as previously mentioned, human structures and vehicles may be used as well.



Bushy-tailed woodrats are herbivores with a broad, flexible diet including cones and needles of coniferous trees, berries, leaves, shrubs, forbs, and mushrooms during our wet years.

They are classified as nongame animals in Colorado, which means they are protected from harassment, killing, or possession except when they are creating a nuisance or creating property damage.

Woodrats can be an important factor in the transmission of certain diseases,

including Colorado Tick Fever, but are rarely, if ever, associated with plague or Hantavirus. Dead or dying woodrats should not be handled.

Damage Prevention and Control Methods

Exclusion

Since they are agile climbers, all entrances to buildings, including those at the attic level, must be closed. Also check for openings in attic vents, broken roof shingles, or other gaps next to the eaves. No hole larger than 1/2 inch (1.3 cm) should be left unsealed. As long as you're in the process of preventing rodents from entering, why not prepare for potential wildfires and ensure the screens are no larger than 1/16 inch in size?

Anticoagulants (blood thinners)

Anticoagulants are effective for woodrat control and are especially suited for use around structures because of their low hazard to pets and children. Most baits formulated for rats and house mice give effective woodrat control. Finely ground, or meal-type, anticoagulant baits are recommended. Since woodrats have a tendency to pack away items, pellet bait should be avoided because it will be stored at the nest site.

Anticoagulants are usually put out in bait boxes, but woodrats tend to fill boxes with sticks and other debris. Therefore, use open bait containers. Bait exposed in this manner must be placed so non-target species, pets, and children do not have ready access to it. Access to the bait by pets can be minimized by inverting a wooden crate over the bait tray. Baiting sites should be located near existing woodrat runways, feeding sites, or nests.

Trapping

The majority of woodrat problems in structures can be dealt with by using traps because they show little fear of new objects in their environment. The standard rat snap trap is quite effective.

Trap bait should be wedged into, or tied, to the treadle. Good baits include nut meats, bacon rind, peanut butter and oatmeal, prunes, raisins and other dried fruit, and biscuits.

Cage traps for woodrats are against Department of Parks and Wildlife regulations. Also, many studies have shown that animals released into new areas often die from exposure, predation, or competition with resident animals.

References: University of California, Dept. of Wildlife, Fisheries and Conservation Biology, Colorado Division of Parks and Wildlife, Montana Field Guide, and USFS Rocky Mountain Research Station.

Mark J. Platten is the Colorado State University Extension Director for Teller County. Extension's focus is bringing the research-based information from Colorado State University to the community. Some programs include Colorado Master Gardeners, 4-H, Native Plant Masters, Agriculture, and Natural Resources. Mark can be reached at 686-7961 or emailed at mark.platten@colostate.edu