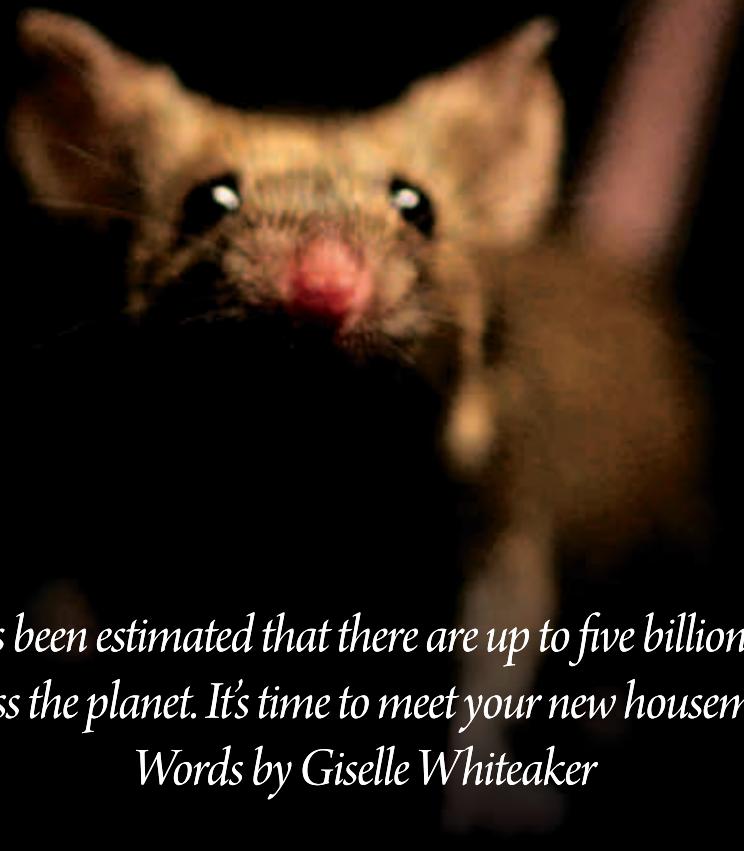


the final say

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OF & MEN

RATS



It has been estimated that there are up to five billion rats across the planet. It's time to meet your new housemate.

Words by Giselle Whiteaker

In my *hem* there lives a rat. It's a reclusive rat, not spotted often, but it is the reason all garbage bags are hung from hooks on the wall. I've seen it, but only at night as it sneaks along the alley in search of food. It must be skilled at this as it's quite chubby. It waddles, twitching its nose and peering short-sightedly through its beady red eyes. Despite this comic-book description, there is something about him that fills me with dread.

The best known rat species, unimaginatively called the black rat and brown rat, originated in Asia. No surprises there. These are called the Old World rats and amusingly are members of the *genus rattus*. Even more amusing is the roof rat, belonging to the species *rattus rattus*. There are more than 50 species of true rats worldwide, and far too many of these call Vietnam home.

Are rats really that bad? On the plus side, they are opportunistic survivors and social creatures, known to be affectionate. They love being in the company of their own species, but will settle for humans. Their hobbies include playing together and sleeping curled up close. They take care of each other, nursing the injured or sick rats in the group. They communicate with each other verbally, using high frequency sounds, as well as by smell, touch and body postures. Going solo they can become lonely, depressed, anxious and stressed. I have never seen my *hem* rat with company. I wonder if I should be concerned

for its mental health.

On the negative side, aren't rats disease carriers? The Black Death is believed to have killed thousands and rats get the blame for that, but was it really their fault? The rat population at that time was also decimated by the plague, so how were they passing it on? It wasn't them, it was their fleas. The fleas bite the infected rats, and then bite people, so they're the ones to blame. Rats do carry other diseases, including Weil's disease, salmonella, tuberculosis, E.Coli and foot and mouth disease. Most of these are spread through rat droppings, urine or saliva, rather than bites, but this doesn't improve the rat reputation and just makes me wonder how it ends up being ingested by people.

• Why, You Dirty Rat?

Working in their favour is the fact that they are very clean animals. They spend several hours each day grooming themselves and each other and are less likely than cats or dogs to transmit viruses. This may explain their growing popularity as domestic pets.

Rats are smart. They have good memories so once they learn a navigation route, they never forget it. Tame rats can be taught selected behaviour. Untamed rats teach themselves. They have an excellent sense of taste and can identify substances, including poisons, after just a tiny taste. This is why most rat poison is slow acting. Undetected, the rat continues to consume the toxin until it reaches critical levels. Until recently Warfarin

was the poison of choice for rats, and bizarrely enough for the treatment of blood clotting conditions in humans. Warfarin is an odourless, tasteless anticoagulant that makes the rat bleed to death internally. Not nice.

A rat trap may be a better option. There are several types of rat traps available, most of which involve bait. The traditional trap is designed to break the rat's neck, but that depends on perfect positioning. More often than not it just squashes the rat. Preferable are those that trap the rat inside a cage, but then what do you do with it? In Vietnam another common method is cardboard traps with a layer of glue. The rat steps onto the cardboard and sticks to the glue, the more it struggles the more stuck it becomes. The nasty side effect is that you are left with a live rat stuck to a piece of cardboard.

The answer may be easier than you think. *Ratatouille* anyone? Rat meat is available all year round in the Mekong Delta, thanks to the region's immense rice fields. The average price for a kilo of rice field rat is VND25,000. In case you're wondering, rat meat can be stir-fried, boiled, grilled or deep-fried, but the most popular form is roasted. Apparently a perfectly roasted rat should have a reddish crispy skin and is served with fish sauce and green mango.

Ratty may make a tasty snack, but I'm not sold on the idea. And so as long as it remains a *hem* rat rather than a house rat, I'm going to let it be. If anyone happens to have a number for the Pied Piper, please pass it on. **W**

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RAT FACTS

— Rats have poor vision. To compensate for this, a red or pink eyed rat will often weave its head side to side to add motion to see better

— Rats don't have thumbs

— Rats use their whiskers to compensate for poor sight, so often stick near walls, rather than heading for wide open spaces

— A rat's temperature is regulated through its tail. A

really hot rat will lie on its back so that it can sweat through the glands in the soles of its feet

— Rats can't see in colour

— A group of rats is fittingly called a mischief. A male rat is a buck; a female is a doe unless pregnant when she becomes a dam, and the offspring are called pups

— Rats can't vomit. A rat can, however, gag on something if it eats too quickly.

— Rats have bellybuttons

— Rats can successfully breed as early as six weeks of age and can produce one litter of up to 20 offspring a month until they are two years of age. In theory this means one female rat could produce around 460 babies

— Gambian pouch rats have been trained to sniff out mines in war torn countries. They are light enough that they do not trigger the mines