



Pack Rats

This is the cute little pack rat. Cute until he decides to make his homestead in your RV. (Photo courtesy of wikimedia commons)



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

My good friend Dan Humphrey and I took a few days off to head back to Arizona for the javelina hunting season. We try to take this trip every couple

of years, to get away from the cold, eat too much without input from spouses, and catch up on all that has gone on over the year.

While we were cruising around on the thousands of acres of public lands, we came across an abandoned, or so we thought, homesite where someone had made a gallant, yet failed attempt at living off grid. There were motor homes, travel trailers, cars, trucks, sheds, and a main house.

This homesite junkyard had been abandoned for decades, as evident from the 1970's license plates, and by the condition of the roofs, tires, and gar-

bage strewn around. We soon discovered that we were not alone.

Every vehicle, building, and RV was loaded with pack rat nests. The floors were at least a foot thick with nesting material, and evidence of the furry trespassers was everywhere. Pack rats are a longtime resident of Colorado also.

Pack rats go by many different street names, sometimes called trade rats (more on that one later), woodrats, and bushy-tailed woodrats. The most common of the 6 species of woodrats found in Colorado is the bushy-tailed woodrat, who can be

found in the yellow pages under the name *Neotoma cinerea*.

Old bushy-tail is the largest of the pack rats, reaching over 16 inches in length, and tipping the scales at a full 11 ounces. They love mountains and can live happily from sea level all the way up to 14,000 feet. These guys look like giants compared to our local voles.

Pack rats have large, hairless ears, long whiskers, and oversized eyes that help them get around at night. Most are gray-brown colored, with black tipped hairs, and have an off-white belly and feet. You will quickly notice the bicolored tail, as it is nearly 1/2 his total body length.

The most active time for these guys is right after sunset, for an hour or so, and at dawn, and they are active the year round.

Pack rats are officially classified as herbivores, with a very flexible diet that includes pinecones, needles of coniferous trees, berries, leaves, shrubs, forbs, and mushrooms. These interlopers will also pig out on any snack food you leave exposed.

They associate with ponderosa pines, Douglas-fir, spruce, and aspen forests. Pack rats need rock shelters, logs, hollow trees, and brush piles to come up with the debris for their shelters, foraging, and denning up. Their nest, which looks like a pile of sticks and debris, can be 4 feet tall.

One of their names, pack rat, comes from their caching and hoarding of items. This behavior is seasonal, usually occurring during the fall and winter months. They will continually add sticks, leaves, and just about anything else, to their houses.

The cold and snow may drive them from their more exposed homes, to under our porches, floorboards, abandoned vehicles and RVs, cabins closed for the season, and just about anywhere else. They are very agile climbers and can enter through just about any opening in a building, or other structure. Pack rats can squeeze through an opening of 1/2 an inch.

Dan Humphrey said, "Back in our outfitting days, we would set up camp, tents, woodstoves, wood floors for the tents, a week before the hunting season. When we arrived, a week later with the hunters, the first thing we had to do was evict the trespassing pack rats. They would be in the cook stoves, under the floors, just about anywhere. They waste no time in moving in."

As one of their many street names implies, they tend to pack away small objects. Anything shiny is fair game. Keep an eye on eating utensils, watches, jewelry, and just about anything they can carry off. If a pack rat is wandering around with a trinket, and stumbles across something else more desirable, they will drop what they are carrying and "trade" it for the new item. Hence the name "trade rats."

Dan Humphrey told me about one trade rat in camp that kept stealing the eating utensils in camp. "We were missing forks, with not enough to go around. I would lay out a quarter, and the trade rat would leave the fork and run off with the coin. The rat also stole a watch, but later traded it back for a teaspoon."

Stories of trade rats swapping items they pilfered from their unwilling hosts abound. I have been

told of a wedding ring that was left on a shelf by the sink (taken off to wash dishes) that was shoplifted by a trade rat. The victim left a beer bottle cap in the same spot the following evening. The shoplifter must have liked the bottle cap better because the next morning, the wedding ring was returned, and the bottle cap gone.

Pack rats can transmit certain diseases, including Colorado Tick Fever. They are not however, associated with the plague or hantavirus. Hantavirus is most often associated with mice and voles. Sweeping out a mice infested cabin should never be done without a respirator because the dust can transmit hantavirus to an unsuspecting individual.

Wood rats, trade rats, bushy-tailed rats, pack rats, or whatever name they go by in your neighborhood, are officially classified as a nongame animal in Colorado, which means they are protected from harassment, killing, or possession except when they are creating a nuisance, or causing damage to property. In that instance, all bets are off.

Mark Rackay is a columnist for the Montrose Daily Press, Delta County Independent, and several other newspapers, as well as a feature writer for several saltwater fishing magazines. He is an avid hunter and world class saltwater angler, who travels around the world in search of adventure and serves as a Director and Public Information Officer for the Montrose County Sheriff's Posse. Personal email is elkhunter77@icloud.com For information about the Posse call 970-765-7033 (leave a message) or email info@mcspi.org



This is a pack rat nest we found in the Arizona backcountry. Better here than in your RV or cabin. (Photo/Mark Rackay)



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