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Buying a Rat Trap ... And More (Natural History Essays)

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Authors	Patenaude, Michele
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Buying a Rat Trap

by Michele Patenaude

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I could see her, but she couldn't see me. She sat nibbling the bird seeds I had scattered on my deck. Her image poured in through the sliding glass door and was reflected back in the glass of my stereo cabinet. She was a rat. Seeing her, I felt myself recoil from some instinctive place. Her rattiness led my mind to sinister portrayals from the dim recesses of my mind. In a dark medieval city, a rag-tag man pushes a cart weighed down with bubonic cadavers, while in the cobblestone alley little groups of rats cluster in the shadows. A Nazi propaganda film shows a swarm of rats teeming over burlap bags of grain as a German language voice-over spews anti-Semitic hatred. Orwell's *1984* protagonist, Winston, tied to a chair and struggling, as that terrible rat-filled cage is lowered onto his screaming head.

It is difficult to be open-minded about rats. Still, the naturalist in me wanted to find a reason to live and let live. I hoped that my rat would somehow be a good rat. I took out my field guide to mammals of North America and read about woodrats, more commonly called pack rats. They were interesting little rodents, living solitary lives in the wild and collecting useless junk. Maybe my rat was a woodrat. But the field guide pointed out that wood rats have fur on their tails. My rat didn't. My rat was a bad rat. In fact, the baddest of the bad rats, the rat that spread bubonic plague, the Black Death. The rat that wiped out half of Europe in the 1300's.

My rat was a Norway rat.

I decided to ignore her, hoping she would go away. I stopped putting bird seed in the feeder.

She did not go away. She settled in and grew comfortable. All day long she sprinted in leaps across the lawn going back and forth from the deck to a pile of rotting sunflower seeds dropped in earlier times under the now empty bird feeder. She was fast and she was nimble. She set up trails across my lawn and kept a regular schedule. She took to grooming her sable fur in the sun on my deck. After a while, she no longer dashed away when I approached the sliding glass door. She was getting used to me. But I was not getting used to her. (I decided it was a “her” on a hunch only, a hunch based on nothing.)

I began to wonder if the neighbors knew about her. I wondered if the wiry little jogging woman took note of my rat on her six a.m. panting passes by my house. I wondered if the young blond woman who lived across the road -- the one with the two small children, the one who did not like me -- I wondered if she knew about my rat.

I gave some thought to my situation. What was the ecologically correct attitude to take toward this rat? I wanted my reaction to be based on science, not ignorance. As a naturalist, I had long stopped harboring prejudice against creatures whose only failing is that they attract bad press. Spiders spin their webs in the corners of my ceiling. Bats roost in the attic. Wasps make their paper nests under the eaves, and ants patrol the foundation. I am aware that mice are in my cellar and under the kitchen sink. As long as these critters don't take to biting me, or to making their home in my bed sheets or my soup, I let them be.

Perhaps I could live with the rat, as well.

Several years earlier, I had spent a few quiet days at a meditation center in western Massachusetts. The center's vegetarian cook was my cousin Roberta, and we spent one long afternoon talking together in the shaded backyard of the big, rambling clapboard house that housed the meditators. She and I were sitting on the grass talking about the meaning of life, about god and about how to live a good life, when a rat slithered out of the garden and up to the meditation center's bird feeder.

I was startled and my cousin noticed.

"We only have one," my cousin said, confirming my as-yet-tentative identification of the animal. "They have a right to live just as much as the chipmunks and the squirrels and the chickadees," she added.

"Of course," I replied. Magnanimity came easily. It was not *my* rat.

But I also recalled my brother's rat story. A few years ago he had seen a single rat nibbling carrot peelings at his compost pile. In a few months a single rat had turned into several. He was not sure how many. He laid out rat poison. A few days later he had gathered about a dozen or so dead rats from his lawn, carefully picking them up by their tails, one by one, and dropping them into a plastic garbage bag.

I might have let my rat be if I could have believed she would remain solitary. But on this my natural history books agreed: Norway rats are not hermits. They like to live surrounded by family and friends.

I decided to buy a rat trap.

Slinking into the hardware store, I furtively scanned the shelves like a teenage boy come into a drug store for a package of condoms. Having a rat is not something you want to announce to the world. But rat traps aren't displayed in hardware store windows or in end displays. It was taking me some time to find them. Eventually, my clinking about among the pipe fittings and screwdrivers attracted a clerk, one who took his job seriously, red vest, name tag and all.

"Can I help you, ma'am?" he announced.

Refusing to succumb to my own humiliation, I responded matter-of-factly, "Yes, you can. I need to buy a rat trap."

"A mouse trap," he said, correcting me.

"No, a rat trap," I countered.

"This way," he said. I followed.

He brought me to a pegboard festooned with a collection of mouse traps. There were the traditional kind, a slab of cheap wood with a simple but effective metal spring. There were other types too. Sticky ones that snare the mouse in an adhesive slow death. Clear plastic boxes to catch the animal unharmed so that the homeowner can enjoy a clear conscience as they release the terrified mouse a few miles down the road, making it a homeless stranger in an alien and dangerous land. An easy meal for a fox, hawk, or house cat. Happily ever after, is not the ending.

"What kind do you want?" he asked me.

"I want a rat trap," I said.

He looked at me, confused.

"These are mouse traps," I said. "I need a rat trap."

He blinked. "Are you sure you have a rat?" he said.

"Yes, I'm sure," I said, annoyed that this purchase was requiring so much conversation.

To his unconvinced face, I presented more testimony. "A mouse is about this long." I held out my two index fingers about four inches apart. "My rat is this long." I widened the gap to over a foot. I included the length of the tail because I liked the exaggeration and because I wanted him to be sure that I knew a mouse from a rat.

"Oh," he said. He reached down to a lower shelf. "I guess you want one of these." He picked it up between his thumb and index finger, as if it were part rat itself.

It was a simple looking contraption, low tech, nothing more than an overgrown mouse trap. A few cheap metal parts secured to a cheap wood platform. When fully armed, the cocked metal spring-bar was held in place by a thinner metal rod which was held down, very tenuously, by a little metal tab on which the bait was served up. The plan was for the hungry rat to step on the trap to get the bait, inadvertently jiggle the bait plate which would release the thin metal rod which would let fly the big spring bar and -- whap! -- dead rat.

Cost -- two and a half bucks.

Unarmed, it lay benignly in its shrink wrapping, mounted on a cardboard square on which were published some handy rat-catching tips concerning bait types and good placements. "Place the trap along a wall where rats might regularly travel," the cardboard advised.

The package sat unopened on my kitchen counter for a few weeks, as I mulled it over. I had some moral concerns about this rat killing. I didn't want to make a mistake and kill an "innocent" creature. There were the three gray squirrels that roamed across the lawn and in the trees, occasionally arguing about some point of squirrel etiquette. There was the chipmunk that lived alone under the back step. And what about the birds? Were these featherweights heavy enough to spring the trap? Probably not the little sparrows and chickadees, but the mourning doves were portly and the bluejays strong.

I was also concerned for the rat itself. I preferred that it die quickly, without suffering. I wanted a humane execution, not a bungled butchering. I was haunted by visions of finding the trap sprung with her little crushed paw still under the metal bar of the trap where she had chewed it off in a desperate escape. I knew that I could not set the trap and just walk away from it. If the trap did not do its job, I would have to be there to finish it. I would have to set it out when I was home and could watch over it carefully.

While I ruminated, the rat trap lay in its shiny wrapper on my counter. I hated the idea of killing anything, even a rat. Besides, I had been watching my rat for a few weeks now, and she was satisfying a morbid curiosity. As a naturalist, I saw this as a rare opportunity to study an animal I was not familiar with. I had never been up close and personal with a rat. So I procrastinated. I might even have been getting a little attached to her.

Then, I stopped seeing her. I kept looking, thinking she'd changed her schedule, or perhaps she had given birth in the crawl space under my sun room and was staying close to the nest for a few days. I watched and watched, looking for her on the deck or running across the lawn or sitting under the bird feeder chewing a sunflower seed. But she was never there. After a few weeks, I realized that she was really gone.

I don't know what happened to her. Her disappearance might have been the doing of the red fox whose tracks I had seen in the winter snow around the barn. Or the coyotes I sometimes heard howling across the hay field. Or the neighbor's black lab, who snuck into the yard regularly to eat the little suet crumbs dropped under the feeder by sloppy woodpeckers. That dog looked like a rat killer. Whatever the reason, she was gone.

I sold that never-used rat trap on Labor Day at my yard sale. A black-haired man in navy blue work pants, who bought nothing else, dropped the two quarters into my hand, and said, "You never know when you're going to need one of these." He looked me straight in the eye and with a knowing anticipation. He was not ashamed.

The next winter, my second rat arrived.

I should have been tipped off when my indoor cats, pulled most of the books out of the bottom shelf of the built-in bookcase in my sun room. I suppose they could hear the rat under the floorboards, but at the time I merely thought "Cats will be cats." What finally tipped me off to her presence -- again I deemed the rat female on no particular evidence -- were the snow tunnels that meandered from the hay bales we used to insulate our foundation to the birdfeeder on the deck. They were too big to have been made by the mice or voles. They couldn't belong to the chipmunks who were all sleeping, their alarm clocks set for March. And I'd never known grey squirrels to tunnel under the snow. No, this was not the work of any of the usual suspects.

On the grocery list hanging on the refrigerator door I scrawled "rat trap."

Like my first rat, this one settled down in the crawl space under my sun room, and spent part of each day, ferrying seeds back and forth from the birdfeeders to her subterranean larder. Once again, sitting in my living room chair I could discreetly observe her comings and goings reflected in the stereo cabinet door. She had a kink in the middle of her naked tail and so I took to calling her "Kinky." I wondered if she had been born with this defect or it was the result of a slamming door, or a close call with a coyote or house cat, or even -- a rat trap.

Animal biologists and behaviorists warn against naming the animals we study. A scientist must not give in to the temptations of anthropomorphism. Naming causes us to lose our objectivity. We begin to project feeling and motive onto the animal. We start to care about them as individuals. If they are injured or fall sick, we want to help them. When it's time to euthanize and dissect, we have misgivings. It's best not to empathize too much with our future victims.

But I named her anyway.

If I was going to kill her, I thought it only right I should name her, personalize her, give her a soul. Make it more difficult for me.

A long time ago, I watched one of those television news magazines broadcast an entire episode on rats. During a segment of the show, the camera followed a middle-aged man and his dog as they roamed the city park at night. Their pastime? Rat killing. It seems the man's dog had a penchant for hunting rats, chasing them down under the shrubbery and shaking them violently, breaking their little necks. This is not an unusual behavior for canines. In fact, rat killing is a trait we have aggressively cultivated in many dog breeds. But the camera was clear that it was the human who was getting the most enjoyment from this sport, cheering the dog on and letting out a "Wah-hoo!" when the dog made the kill. (I'll bet he lets that dog lick his face.) The man's reaction was much

the same as if he had been enjoying a ringer in a game of horseshoes or a strike in on the bowling alley.

Why is it that we despise the species that have evolved along side us? We loathe those creatures that choose us, prefer us, that have been our fellow travelers on that long road of evolution. Cockroaches, lice, pigeons, rats. For hundreds of years Norway rats have been our loyal companions and familiars, have wedded their fortunes to ours, moved into our homes and shared our food and water. Millions of Norway rats died during the Bubonic Plague years.

It seems that rat physiology and psychology are strikingly similar to our own. We breed albinos of this species and fill the cages of our medical laboratories with them. We study rats to learn about ourselves, to find cures for our diseases and for our disdained behaviors. Despite our similarities (or perhaps because of them) we hate rats from some deep, instinctual, primordial place. We take morbid satisfaction in killing them. We crush them and trap them, gas them and poison them.

I was going to kill Kinky. I premeditated.

I would do it without malice. I would do it without joy. But I would do it.

At the hardware store the clerk was gone, but the rat traps were in the same place, same price. The cashier rang it up without comment and, assuming I wanted to hide the purchase, she slipped it into a small paper sack.

At home, I took it out, removed the wrapper, and practiced setting it and then triggering it with a fork. I was surprised at how fast (faster than my eye) and how powerful it was. I had no doubt that it would kill a rat. Or break my finger.

I brushed away the snow from in front of the feeder, placed the trap there, set it, and carefully sprinkled it with sunflower seeds for good measure. To get the seeds, the rat would have to walk onto the trap-- and spring it.

Impatient, I sat by the glass door waiting for the rat to show. But this wasn't her time. I read the newspaper, the phone rang, I picked it up and talked for a while, hung up. Still no rat. I sat down in my chair, stereo cabinet reflection in front of me, and began reading from a book of essays. I forgot about Kinky. When the "whap!" finally came, I was momentarily startled.

I stepped up to the door, afraid I would see a squirrel or bird. The silky brown patch of fur half buried in the snow set my mind at ease. I was further relieved that it wasn't moving, not even slightly. I opened the door and walked out to inspect my victim.

I was strangely disappointed that it had been so easy, that it was all over so soon, that the rat had been so gullible. The trap had caught the animal squarely across the back of the neck, pinning its head to the board. Its dark eyes were open, still moist and clear. Its four feet were bare and I could see its long pink toes. Its mouth was parted, and its little buck teeth showed. The rest of its limp body lay off the end of the trap, draped in snow. Up close it was larger than I expected, and softer. Its tail was fleshy, looking like a small bull whip -- but it had no kink.

This was not Kinky. This was a different rat. The situation was worse than I had thought.

I lost no time, and set the trap again in the same place. Inside, I washed my hands up to the wrists and for a very long time. I didn't see Kinky or any other rat that day. As the evening began to fall, I sprung the trap and called it a day.

The next day, I set the trap and waited. Kinky showed up.

She was wary of the trap, going up to it, running her nose along its edge and then running back to her refuge in the hay bales we used to insulate the foundation of the sun room. Perhaps the trap smelled of death. Or maybe she was a smart rat. In any case, several winter bird feeding stations were scattered

throughout the yard, providing her with other safer, if more distant, opportunities for seed. She could avoid the suspicious contraption, and she did.

I countered by letting all the feeding stations run empty except for the one on my back deck. Forced to use the booby-trapped feeder, she learned how to carefully remove the sunflower seeds from the trap one by one with her mouth, never setting so much as a paw onto the trap's surface. One day I watched her take a few dozen seeds off the trap this way, never setting it off. Days went by and Kinky was still very much alive and well. I was going to have to come up with a new strategy.

I recalled that trappers camouflage their snares and leg-hold traps by covering them with leaves or snow. So I covered my trap with a shallow layer of fluffy snow that had fallen that morning and I sprinkled a small pile of seeds on the surface. I wasn't sure it would work. Kinky might know the trap was there and continue to avoid walking over it. Even if she didn't see the trap, I was afraid the snow might provide too much cushion, allowing her to walk over the trap without triggering it. But I was running out of strategies and I had nothing to lose.

I never heard the trap, and I'll bet Kinky didn't either. The next time I checked the deck, there she was in the trap, half covered in snow. Like her colleague, she too had been killed when the bar struck her across the back of the neck. She too had open eyes and parted teeth. Wedged between her teeth was a single black sunflower seed. Kinky was dead.

Unexpectedly, I felt a deep sense of satisfaction. I enjoyed finally bagging my trophy, and imagined it felt much the same as the deer hunter who, after several weeks of tracking, gets the big buck. I pried open the trap and lifted her up by her kinked tail. I dropped her in the same spot where I had dumped her friend a few weeks earlier.

I thought I would feel more remorse for taking the lives of two rats, but I didn't. I thought that killing a rat, never mind two, would transform me in some way, would make life's meaning come into focus a little more clearly, give me insights into life and death.

But it didn't.

What I did learn is that if you are brazen enough to admit to having had rats, you will find that you are not alone. People will come out of the closet and confess their rat stories, too. A man I worked with told me about the colony he discovered in his cellar. An old friend told me about the rat that moved into his eight-year-old daughter's bedroom drawers. And yet another acquaintance talked about a rat that would run boldly across his bedroom floor while he read a book in bed before going to sleep.

They all killed their rats, too.

After I killed Kinky, I left the trap in a corner of the deck in case I had yet more rats to execute. But she was my last. After a few weeks, I took the trap inside and stored it on the work bench in the cellar. And there it sits, ready and waiting. Like the man in the blue work pants at my yard sale said, you never know when you're going to need one of those things.