Pest Control

By Carol Henning

“Rats were leaving Manhattan, hurrying across the bridges in single-file lines. Some went to Westchester, some to Brooklyn. It was the pandemic, and the rats, which had been living off the nourishing trash of New York’s densest borough for generations, were as panicked about the closure of restaurants as we were. People were eating three meals a day at home, and the rats were hungry.” So says a story from “The New Yorker” online.

“In 2021, there were 25,000 reported rat sightings, more than double the number from 2010.” Where did all the rats come from? What did New York residents do about them? From reading about the harm rat poison inflicted on Griffith Park’s only mountain lion resident, we humans (at least some of us) should be aware that rat poison—anticoagulant rodenticide—moves up the food chain and can become potentially lethal as the dose accumulates in larger animals. By the time P-22 was captured near the end of 2025, he was a very sick cat. Many of his maladies could be traced back to his ingestion of rat poison.

The dominant species of rat in most American cities is Rattus Norwegicus. These Norway rats are also known as brown rats, but they did not originate in Norway. Instead, they trace back to the high-steppe area in present day Mongolia and China. (Perhaps the first Norway rats to arrive in New York Harbor in the 18th century were eager to sample American cuisine and hitched a ride on a cruise ship.) Norway rats can, and still do, sometimes live in the wild, but, more commonly, they are connoisseurs of old pizza slices…” the New Yorker observes. It characterizes the rats as urbanites.

Rodentologist Bobby Corrigan gave a presentation at the first National Rat Summit, held in New York City in 2024. Corrigan explained how remote rat sensor technologies are enabling early intervention before rat gatherings get out of hand. Treating a rat issue by using poison is “definitely not the smartest thing.” This is “not only because these poisons end up affecting hawks, owls, raccoons, opossums, and neighborhood cats, but also because it fails to quash the problem.” As we have seen, mountain lions, including P-22, are also sickened and disabled. Corrigan said that “poison wins battles, not wars. He explained that rats reproduce so quickly that a ninety-six-percent kill rate would be required to prevent a population rebound.

“Rats in a city, rats on a block—that’s an environmental issue,” Corrigan argued. “Rather than thinking of exterminating rats, we should ask: Why are they here? Would better garbage cans discourage them? (When Corrigan was in rat-infested barns, watching the

rats interact with one another, he saw rats bringing gifts to other rats, as well as demonstrations of kindness, joy, anger and sadness. A neuroscientist at the University of Richmond observed that rats learned to drive miniature vehicles in pursuit of treats and also just for fun. The “better trash cans” approach proved successful as did new side-loading trash trucks, which collect containers more quickly.

Studying the efficacy of rat birth-control, researchers put up cameras to monitor whether the rats were drinking the birth-control bait. The researchers got “thousands of pictures of rats grooming each other, playing with each other, wrestling.” Spend a bit of time with animals who have suffered from centuries of bad publicity, and one can see friendships, kindness, humor, courage, generosity—traits we usually expect in other humans or perhaps our pets.

Have you seen rats in Griffith Park. In my many years of hiking there, I have seen a few rats, usually gathered around a bits of a discarded, half-eaten sandwich.

A category of creature that is usually even lower on the list of non-human animals than rats is insects. Butterflies, bees, dragonflies and certain beetles, spiders, wasps, and ants might capture our attention, but many insects seem to be viewed primarily as nuisances.

Rachel Carson had spent most of her life as a marine biologist and writer with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Her book, “The Sea Around Us,” was a huge success. Carson was 50 years old when she wrote it, and it made her a world-famous author. Royalties from that book and one to follow it, “The Edge of the Sea,” enabled her to devote most of her time to writing. Carson could have continued to write about her enthusiasm for scientific research, but, while working for the government, she and her colleagues had become alarmed by the widespread use of DDT and other long-lasting poisons in “agricultural control” programs. After the Second World War, when the dangers of these poisons had been recognized, Carson tried to interest some magazines in an article on this topic. But the magazines, afraid of losing advertising, turned her down. (The one exception was The New Yorker.) Still, Carson realized she’d have to write a book, and that she’d have to do it herself.

“There would be no peace for me,” she wrote to a friend, “if I kept silent.” It took more than four years to write the book, and it took courage. She knew she’d be attacked by the chemical industry because she would make clear the irresponsibility of an industrialized technological society toward the natural world. The attacks described her as an “ignorant “and hysterical” woman who wanted to turn Mother Earth over to the bugs.’

Fortunately, John Kennedy was the U.S. President at that time, and he set up a special panel of his Science Advisory Committee to study the problem of pesticides. The panel's report was a complete vindication of Carson's thesis. Her book helped to make ecology one of the great popular causes of our time. By awakening us to a specific danger—the poisoning of the planet with chemicals—she helped us to recognize other ways in which we humans are degrading the quality of life for everyone and everything on earth. Change can be brought about, not by war or by violent revolution, but instead by changing our thinking about the world in which we live.

Who, or what, are the most dangerous pests? Scientific evidence continues to grow, connecting the most widely used class of insecticide, neonics, to human health risks. The Environmental Protection Agency has failed to respond to petitions by environmental groups calling on it to revoke its "food tolerances"—the level of pesticide residue allowed in food—for neonics. Dan Raichel, director of the NRDC (Natural Resources Defense Council) Polinators and Pesticides program, pointed out that, "six years ago we had more than enough evidence to warrant EPA action." Studies have linked neurotoxic neonics to health problems, including birth defects, cognitive impairment and low testosterone. The ever-growing use of neonics has also been tied to environmental damage as well, including the decline of bees and other pollinators. Raichel pointed out that the law is clear. "The EPA's job is to protect us from toxic pesticides like neonics." It is no surprise that, where there is money to be made, damage to living things and their environment moves to the end of the line. Letting nature itself provide remedies does not fatten wallets, but here is an example of a surprising and delightful natural remedy: Bat-eared foxes have ears so sensitive that they can hear termite larvae hatching deep underground. These foxes have 50 teeth—more than any land mammal—and they can inhale 1.15 million termites a year!

In "A Fable for Tomorrow," Carson describes a town in the heart of America where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings until "a strange blight crept over the area. Everywhere was death…. There was a strange stillness. The birds, for example—where had they gone?.... On the mornings that had once throbbed with the dawn chorus… there was now no sound…. No witchcraft, no enemy action had silenced the rebirth of new live in this stricken world. The people had done it themselves."