

Controlling Rats and Rodents

The roof rat is the major problem species in Southern California. This agile rat is slender with the tail longer than the head and body. Roof rats frequently enter buildings and move about neighborhoods by using utility lines and fences as runways. The roof rats prefer to feed on many of the fruits, nuts, ivy, and pet food commonly found in residential backyards.

Rats and their fleas are capable of transmitting a variety of human diseases. Among the diseases transmitted by rats, bubonic plague is perhaps the most serious. Marine typhus is another rat-borne disease that exists in certain areas of Southern California. This disease, like plague, can be transmitted by rat fleas.

Roof rat survival and prosperity are dependent upon the existence of these three basic environmental conditions:

- abundance of food
- available source of water
- access to suitable harborage

Good environmental management practices supplemented by the wise use of rodenticides are the most effective approaches to roof rat control program. The homeowner can help control rat populations by doing the following:

- Harvest oranges, avocados, peaches, apricots, plums, walnuts, and tangerines as soon as they ripen. Pick up all fallen fruit.
- Never leave uneaten food outside overnight.
- Keep pet food in sealed metal containers if stored in the garage or other outbuildings.
- Keep palm trees and yucca plants well trimmed. Algerian ivy, oleander, bougainvillea, and other thickly matted plants should be periodically thinned and trimmed well away from roofs, walls, fences, utility poles, and trees.
- Store wood and lumber piles on racks at least 18 inches above the ground and 12 inches away from walls. Storage boxes housed in utility sheds should be stacked close together and in an orderly fashion. Clean up debris piles.
- Repair leaky faucets and eliminate any other unnecessary standing water.

Roof rats can enter a home through small exterior openings of less than one inch in diameter. Important steps a homeowner can take to exclude rats are inspecting and repairing:

- windows and ventilation ports
- attic vents and louvers
- gaps between roof and chimney
- vent pipes and shafts
- tile roofs along the eaves

All access openings should be screened with 1/4 inch galvanized hardware cloth and inspected at least once a year for condition. Gaps around pipes and electrical conduit should be sealed, and cracks around doors and windows should be weatherproofed. Tree limbs should be kept away from eaves, roofs and exterior walls of the house.