

THE RAT IN ALBERTA - A BRIEF HISTORY

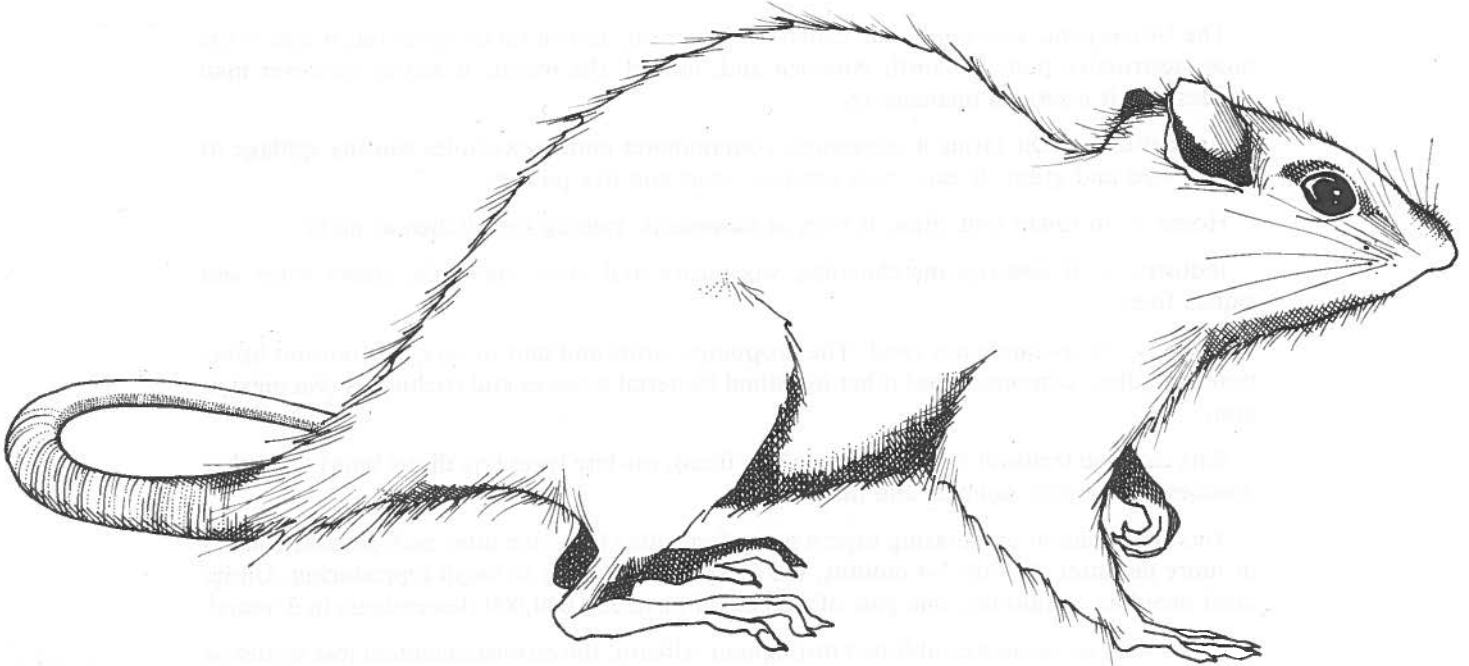


Figure 2. The Norway rat (actual size)

The Norway rat is not native to North America, but gained entry probably as a stowaway with European settlers. Rats followed the westward movement of colonists, reaching the Great Lakes during the late 1800s and spreading across the Canadian prairie during the early 1900s. In the summer of 1950, the first recorded rat colony in Alberta was discovered on a farm near Alsask on the Saskatchewan border. Surveys by the provincial government revealed that colonization was occurring in the area between Empress and Consort. By 1952, 39 colonies had been found and the rat threat to Alberta was recognized as a reality.

The Department of Agriculture employed a rat exterminating firm to eradicate existing colonies and to prevent further infestation along the fourth meridian. This work commenced in June, 1952 and was completed in July, 1953. Arsenic powder was the main control chemical used. Over 140,000 lb of this rat contact powder were placed under all buildings where rats were present or could become established between Medicine Hat and Provost, an area 240 km (150 miles) long and up to 57 km (36 miles) wide. This included 2,700 farmsteads and over 8,000 buildings. The exterminators also dismantled many old buildings and rat-proofed others.

This program was expensive, and arsenic use was dangerous to people and animals. Safer anticoagulant "warfarin" baits proved effective and became the main control poison used. In 1954, the Department of Agriculture initiated a municipal-provincial rat control program that is still in use today (see below.) Rat control legislation was passed and pest control officers appointed in every city, village, town and rural municipality in the province. Between 100-200 infestations were exterminated each year along the Alberta-Saskatchewan border during the 1960s, using warfarin bait. By the late 1970s, only 40-100 infestations were occurring annually. This program has succeeded in preventing the colonization by rats in Alberta to the present day.

Alberta is fortunate to be bounded on its north, south and west by rat-free areas. With the recent initiation of rat control programs in Saskatchewan and Manitoba, the task of defending the eastern border may be lighter in future years.

While overland migration is the major source of infestation in Alberta, a few rats enter via shipments of freight. Continued vigilance is necessary to spot and eradicate rats which enter in this way.