

## Rat Free Alberta

By Kerri Savage



Most Albertans don't know what a rat looks like. Call us lucky. Call us determined. Call us smart. Many newcomers to Alberta have a hard time believing that the province is officially rat-free. It's a pretty big claim to fame, but how is it possible? Do these vermin know to turn back at the Saskatchewan border?

Norway rats, also known as the common rat or brown rat, are not native to North America, but have gradually spread from the east coast where they were likely introduced from ships arriving from Europe. Prolific breeders, rats are destructive to property and carry fleas and other organisms that spread disease. These are the very rats that are linked to spreading the Plague across Europe in the 1600s.

Alberta's diligent battle to remove these hazardous rodents from the province started in the 1950s. The rats had migrated to the eastern border of the province at this time, first discovered on a farm near Alsask. Concerned over the possible spread of disease, the proactive Alberta government implemented a rat control program, creating a buffer zone along the Alberta/Saskatchewan border, one that still exists today.

The control of rats was achieved through both education and extermination. Most Albertans had no previous experience with rats, so did not know what they looked like, or how to get rid of them. The Alberta government, through Alberta Agriculture, distributed information on the rat and dangers associated with them. Their recommendations on how to eliminate rat habitat, food supply and tips on rat-proofing buildings are still used in the control of rat populations today.

Acting quickly to prevent further movement west, Alberta Agriculture, in partnership with a private pest control company, also provided lists of recommended toxins to rid any suspected infestations. In the early 50s arsenic tracking powder was used to treat permanent and some temporary structures along a 300 km area between Medicine Hat and Provost. The tracking powder would accumulate on the rodent's skin and fur and be consumed while grooming. Though effective, there was some unintentional poisoning of livestock and pets prompting Alberta Agriculture to inform residents of the residual dangers of the powder.

The high cost and danger of the arsenic powder could have crippled Alberta's rat control program. Fortunately, Warfarin, a safe but effective anticoagulant rodent poison (it prevents or delays blood clotting) became available in 1954, and was distributed to newly-appointed pest control inspectors in seven rural municipalities tasked with most of the province's rat control. The poison was added to rolled oats that acted as bait.

Success for Alberta's rat control program can be attributed to many factors. Consuming almost anything, rats are dependent on human populations in order to successfully migrate. Alberta's sparse population, especially in the mostly rural southeast, has slowed the spread of the rat and made it easier to isolate any infestation. And luckily, rats cannot survive in the boreal forest to the north and the Rockies to the west. The climate does not allow the rat to winter in open fields where they might live undetected nor breed year round. Finally, because the government responded so quickly at the first sign of the rodent, the rat did not have the opportunity to migrate and local governments and citizens were educated to help stop infestations immediately.

Our Saskatchewan neighbour also implemented a rat control program in 1963 which has helped reduce rats from migrating. The two provinces share information and Alberta municipal employees have helped work with their Saskatchewan counterparts to aid with that province's rat control program.

It is illegal for Albertans to keep rats, of any variety, as pets or pet food. Only universities, research institutions and/or zoos may have this domesticated variety of the Norway rat on premises.

The only other known rat-free regions are the Arctic, Antarctic, some isolated islands and conservation areas of New Zealand. The threat to Alberta's rat free status is still a concern. Though Alberta's rat control program has been successful and is now primarily a maintenance program, provincial personnel must continually educate the public and investigate reports of suspected infestations.