

Chicago Tribune

Chicago's rat problem gnaws at feline fears

Solving Chicago's rat problem with wild cats, as one alderman suggested, gnaws at Tribune columnist Dahleen Glanton's fear of felines. (Don Bartletti / MCT)

By Dahleen Glanton - Contact Reporter, Chicago Tribune, November 2, 2017

I dread winters in Chicago, and the snow has nothing to do with it.

It's those Norwegian rats that make my life miserable.

Last month, pest control company Orkin ranked Chicago No. 1 among the most rat-infested cities in America. We've held that title for three years in a row.

Though rats usually are more active in the summer, they seem to get bolder as winter approaches. They might prefer to live outside, but they are smart little creatures that know a harsh winter could wipe out much of their population. And they are determined not to let that happen.

As the temperature drops, those often not-so-little beady-eyed monsters start creeping around in alleys en masse looking for food and shelter. They love to flock to diverse neighborhoods like mine where the menu is not limited to McDonald's and Subway.

Here, they get to gorge on discarded leftovers from an array of ethnic restaurants, feasting on kebabs and naan one night and Thai noodles the next.

With their bellies full, they wobble across the street in search of structural cracks no bigger than a quarter, where they can contract their furry, fatty bodies tight enough to squeeze into our homes.

The 100-year-old apartment buildings in my neighborhood, with all their vintage allure, seem to roll out the red carpet for them. The rodents chew holes through the cracking baseboards, push their way through the floor and build their nests between the boxes of junk piled up in our basements.

It is often there that females give birth to the next generation of pesky devils. A rat only lives on average six to 12 months. But by the time they are 2 or 3 months old, the female can produce four to seven litters a year, each one of them containing eight to 12 babies.

If we're not careful, these curious offspring will find their way into our kitchens.

Thankfully, we've taken steps to alleviate the problem in my apartment building, so that's not my biggest concern this year. I'm more worried about the abatement measures that might eventually take place outside my back door.

Every year around this time, the city has to try and figure out what to do with the growing rat problem. Aldermen's phones are ringing off the hook with angry residents complaining that rats are taking over the neighborhood.

At a budget hearing recently, Ald. Carrie Austin asked the question ailurophobes like me fear the most.

She wanted to know if the Streets and Sanitation Department had discussed enlisting feral cats to fight the rodent problem.

In other words, she wanted to know if the city had considered releasing an army of wild cats into our neighborhoods. For people who suffer from the fear of cats, that's just as horrifying as turning on the light and seeing a rat scurrying across the kitchen floor.

Thank goodness, more sensible heads prevailed.

Streets and Sanitation Commissioner Charles Williams pointed out that while the feral cats might be effective in getting rid of the rats, we would then be stuck with a bunch of feral cats roaming the neighborhoods.

He didn't mention that some people are downright scared to death of cats. But that's OK because most people don't understand ailurophobia anyway. That's why we lie and say we're allergic when we turn down dinner invitations to a cat-lover's home.

Williams, instead, gave an excuse that everyone can relate to.

"The feral cats can be somewhat aggressive," he said. "I wouldn't want the city to be associated with putting an aggressive animal on the street that could end up hurting someone's child."

Austin responded with one of the scariest lines I'd ever heard.

"Some of (the rats) are bigger than the cats," she said.

We ailurophobes may have dodged the bullet this year, but it could be just a matter of time before the city starts looking seriously at flooding our alleys with cats.

Chicago is home to the crafty Norwegian rat, which like most vermin will eat anything from plants to dog poop. They prefer to live underground, but in Chicago, they have been known to build colonies in light posts and even in the trunk of a tree.

With the city unable to get a grip on the problem, some residents are seeking help elsewhere.

The Tree House Humane Society runs a program that has placed about 800 feral cats in neighborhoods at the residents' request. The cats are sterilized, vaccinated and microchipped before they are placed on patrol. They even have a clipped ear to indicate that they are working cats.

The cats have been used in several North Side neighborhoods, as well as in the suburbs, according to company officials. At one point, there were 50 cats roaming Lincoln Park. Company officials claim the effort is 100 percent effective.

So far, though, the city hasn't expressed any interest in hiring cats to patrol our alleys. Officials believe they can bring the problem under control with bait, dry ice and poisons that keep rats from reproducing.

Those remedies might sound inhumane. But I guarantee it's a more pleasant death than being eaten alive by a cat.

Nothing will work, though, unless residents do our part. Let's bundle up our garbage, place it in trash bins and close the lids tight.

And the next time your dog poops in the alley, make sure you take a moment to clean it up.

A rat that has just had a hearty serving of dog poop is going to turn up its nose and walk away from poison pellets.