

As population grows, rats in Olympia are becoming a year-round nuisance

By Abby Spegman

July 27, 2019

Flemming Behrend has seen rats in his backyard garden in northeast Olympia before. But this summer seems different.

“The rats just love to come visit and eat some tomatoes and zucchini, whatever we have,” he said. “One morning I opened the greenhouse and there it was, a big fluffy rat.”

Rats in Olympia aren’t new — Norway rats arrived in the area on wooden ships a century ago — but pest control experts say a boom in the roof rat population over the past decade has turned a seasonal problem into a year-round business.

“I don’t see any end in sight,” said Todd Player, owner of Standard Pest Control, where roof rats are the most common pest plaguing customers. “We could do nothing but rats and we would survive.”

It’s the same at Venables Pest Management. Owner Steve Venables said he saw his first roof rat in the area in 2006 and has been seeing them ever since.

While Norway rats typically burrow underground, roof rats, which are darker in color, are more likely to nest in attics or trees. While Norway rats are mostly in and around downtown Olympia, roof rats have spread throughout the cities and into rural parts of Thurston County.

Venable said he used to get rat-related calls when the weather turned cold and the animals would get into houses to get warm. In recent years, though, this is an everyday occurrence.

“The most important thing with rat control is to disallow them from entering the building in the first place,” he said.

That’s because once inside, rats can gnaw on plumbing or electrical lines. Player suggests making sure all foundation vents are covered and no tree limbs or branches are touching the roof.

Gardens, fruit trees, bird feeders, pet food, compost piles and chicken coops all can attract rats.

But it can be hard to stop a determined rat.

On a recent Monday morning, Miguel Perez-Gibson got this text message from his renter in Olympia’s Wildwood neighborhood: “Help, there’s a live rat swimming in my toilet.”

Perez-Gibson went to deal with the rat, who had apparently climbed up through the sewer line. Later he heard from neighbors who had the same experience.

“I thought this was an urban legend,” said Perez-Gibson, who called a plumber to install a one-way valve to prevent it from happening again. “This was an eye-opening experience. My eyes are still open.”