

5-13-11 Cats and Rats

When people call my office with a complaint, sometimes I can't help but wonder if the claim is made to get my attention. One of these times is when they complain about rats. Perhaps there are "ordinary" animals, such as possums or mice or squirrels but rats would get the attention of the health agent, right? I go out to look, anyway. It is sort of the opposite of innocent until proven guilty. Well, no not the opposite. I don't assume guilty until proven innocent. But I have to act on the possibility of truth, in case it is. And then I seek confirmation or I might discover something completely different from the complaint, such as the neighbors don't like each other. Even that can result in public health nuisances. They need to learn to stay to their own property. Also, talk to your neighbors before you cut down trees near property lines and be considerate as to where you place dumpsters. Keep dumpsters closed and don't let them overflow.

There have been times when the claims of rats were very real. I remember the man; in fact I'll never forget the elderly man, who tried to keep up with his deceased wife's cats. Some got loose and the yard and barn ended up full of them. The yard was overgrown with meadow hay and there were tunnels everywhere, as evidence of the rat trails. Here, there and everywhere, the yard and barn were filled with litters of kittens, many of them nursing, some hissing and arching their little backs, as they were not accustomed to seeing people. Most of them were very sick with gooey eyes half open, half stuck. It was the saddest animal situation I had ever witnessed.

Despite his apparent health and strength, the owner's mind had been wandering ever further down the path of dementia. I asked him about the neighbors' claims of rats. He told me with a chuckle and even a bit of nonchalant pride that of course there were a few rats and they were as harmless as any pet. I was invited to see for myself as he went into the barn to fill dishes with cat food.

In the corner of the barn, now a dark cobwebby shell of what used to be filled with life, horses and activity, I could hear the squeaking of a nest of rats. As the owner poured the dry cat food, the cats not yet completely feral, arrived, as did their rodent friends. Sure enough, just as the owner had described, there was a rat that was so used to participating in feeding time with the cats, that she seemed like a pet. This was no pet, though. It was the biggest and fattest rat I had ever seen. It was not one of those little ones you buy in a pet shop and can hold in one hand. It was as big as some of the cats.

Although the man was in denial of this being a problem, he was later bit by a rat and regretted that he had "let things go so far".

Letting things go too far is so easy. Undoing the consequences is not. Leaving food outdoors on a continual basis is one way to attract many animals, including rats and mice. Rodents carry and spread disease, including Leptospirosis, Lymphocytic Chorio-

meningitis, Rat-Bite Fever, and Salmonellosis, Tularemia and many other diseases are indirectly spread by rodents, such as Lyme disease and Rocky Mountain spotted fever.

When people fail to neuter their cats and allow them to roam outdoors, it is a cruel injustice to both the cat and the neighborhood. When the cats are fed outdoors, inviting wild animals to feast along with the feral cats, it is inviting a public health nuisance of stinking odors, wild screeching fights, and diseases such as rabies and disease-carrying fleas.

It is not a help in any way shape or form to let cats go wild and simply stick some food outdoors for them, without also vaccinating and neutering them. Only feeding them prolongs their agony of the struggle to survive, with many of them dying of sickness or being hit by vehicles while crossing the road to get to their next outdoor dish or rubbish bag.

According to Myers, P. and D. Armitage, 2004, "Rattus norvegicus", "An average female is capable of giving birth approximately seven times per year. Around 18 hours after giving birth, females experience postpartum estrus, and mate again. This reproductive function is responsible for the huge birthrates of Norway rats, which can reach 60 young each year per female.

According to the Journal of Veterinary Medicine, JAVMA, Vol 225, No. 9, November 1, 2004, "in one study, up to 90% of kittens died before 6 months of age. Similarly, 81 of 169 (48%) kittens in the present study had died or disappeared before they were 100 days old, and 127 (75%) had died or disappeared before they were 6 months old. Trauma accounted for the death of most kittens for which cause of death was confirmed." Trauma was by car, dog, fox, and hawk. That's not a pretty life for the wild cat.

Here are my lessons learned:
Let wild animals be wild and leave them alone.
Let domestic animals have caring owners who vaccinate and neuter them.
Keep your garbage contained and out of reach of wild animals.
Garbage attracts rodents.
Rodents and cats are very good at reproducing. Let's not encourage it.
If you know of a "feral" cat, trap, neuter & vaccinate it.

Cathleen Drinan is the health agent for Halifax, MA . Cats and rats may have been included on the Arc and the Irish Rovers may have sung a lively tune about them but sure as you're born, if people don't start behavin', I'm getting out my bullhorn!

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