Is the super rat on the rise?

They are immune to the strongest poison, they can nibble through your car’s brake lines, and are reported to be 2 foot long - are we going to be invaded by super rats?

Super rats can’t be killed by poison and can cause damage to people’s homes. Photo: Don Proctor © SWNS Group

By Nick Harding
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Batten down the hatches, lock your doors, block your pipes and buy a cat - because they are upon us.

A plague of super rats smart enough to outwit pest controllers and immune to the strongest poison could be scratching at your back door right now, keen to get inside your nice cosy house.

They may be gnawing at the brake lines under the bonnet of your car, climbing up the ivy on your walls and propagating in the garden shed - primed to cause millions of
pounds of damage as they gnaw through doors, floors and walls with tooth enamel so strong it can power through concrete, bringing with them the gift of disease.

According to dire reports, we are about to suffer an infestation of 2ft rats eager to escape winter's chill.
Pest control firms report a staggering 40 per cent rise in call-outs for rodent infestations when temperatures plummet and this year rats have been amassing in biblical numbers ready for the uninvited visitation.
The warm autumn, bumper late harvest and mild early winter have all conspired to allow the rodents to keep breeding for longer this year, churning out squeaking pups with the efficiency of a German automotive production line.
"Lionel Peters was forced to live in the dark for three months after rats repeatedly gnawed through electric cabling in his loft"

The female rat is nature's apex trollop, who can mate 500 times with various males during a six-hour period of 'receptivity'. Thus a pair of brown rats can produce as many as 2,000 descendants in a year and up to 6,000 in a lifetime.
Rumours abound of armies of rats as big as cats infesting whole towns. Earlier this year, a swarm of 'super-rats' which had evolved a genetic mutation making them
impervious to over-the-counter poisons, invaded Swindon, in Wiltshire. Over in Reading, residents kept their children indoors this summer and petitioned the council, after an army of similar mutants crawled under their car bonnets and started gnawing the brake lines.

A mutant rat that was caught in Penryn, Cornwall, earlier this year.

The audacious rodents staged raids in family larders and “poo-bombed” supplies. “It is horrific because you just feel the food you have in your own home could be contaminated,” said Richard Rowlands, of Baker Street Area Neighbourhood Association.

“You have to check every packet before you use it. Recently, a resident’s car failed its MOT because rats had gnawed through the pipes; she is now afraid to even park in that area.”

In April Liverpool was hit. In November it was Bristol. Over in Huddersfield, pensioner Lionel Peters was forced to live in the dark for three months after rats repeatedly gnawed through electric cabling in his loft.

Each night he could hear them scurrying in the ceiling, mocking him. Estimates suggest the British Isles will be awash with 160 million of the oily critters by year’s end: Hamelin without the piper; Room 101 with the cage door flung open.

“If it is exceptionally big, it is not a rat, it is something else. Indigenous rats are the same size as they have always been”
It is fair to say that human-rat relations have always been strained. Despite Disney’s best anthropomorphic efforts in the film Ratatouille, our first reaction on seeing a rat in a kitchen is not to hand it a ladle and allow it to stir the bisque - but to target it with zinc phosphide pellets and bring its life to a spasmodic, haemorrhaging conclusion. Our instinct to kill is understandable. Occasionally there is a truce, usually after a scientist manages to grow a fully-functioning appendage on a genetically-tampered lab rat, prompting hope for the prospect of regenerative medicine for humans. But on the whole, our inter-species rapport has never really recovered from the bubonic plague epidemics of 1349 and 1665, caused by germ-carrying fleas which lived as parasites on rats.

The UK’s domestic species of rat carry Weil’s disease, Salmonella, Listeria and others. Today, plague rats persist to trouble Madagascans with outbreaks of an antibiotic-immune strain of the Black Death (the latest, this January) but thankfully our domestic species only carry Weil’s disease, Salmonella, Listeria, Toxoplasma gondii and Hantavirus.
So just how worried should we be? According to John Davison, Chief Executive of the National Pest Technicians Association (NPTA), we could use a little perspective. “For several years, we ran a competition for members to send us pictures of their biggest rats and we got all sorts of pictures through, but nothing staggering,” he explains. “The maximum was 20 inches long and 2 lb.” What of the 50cm beast - the biggest ever - found in Cornwall, last year? “If it is exceptionally big, it is not a rat, it is something else. Indigenous rats are the same size as they have always been. If it something bigger it is probably a coconut rat from another country. It is certainly not British. When people report seeing rats as big as dogs that can eat cats, it is all rubbish. Amusing, but rubbish all the same.”

CCTV footage of the river rat in China.

He had several tips for homeowners wishing to secure against murine marauders: fill any large cracks in the walls; fix broken air bricks (rats can squeeze through 2in holes); remove vegetation growing up to roofs and eaves, ivy is a rat ladder; seal any holes in walls that have been left by pipes that have been removed and check for broken drain covers.

But we shouldn’t fear rat aggression, apparently: they do not attack humans out of choice. “They are intelligent, there is no way they will look at something 300 times their size and think, ‘I’ll attack that’,” says Davison.

"A rat just wants to survive, live its life and do what it needs to do. If threatened, they certainly will not jump at you with the intention of killing you. They often just want to get past you, and sometimes the only way is up and over.” To illustrate his point, the pest control veteran of 30-years details the time he pulled up the floor of a 6ft by 4ft wooden shed and discovered 59 rats living underneath: “They ran everywhere; up my legs, jumping off my shoulders, but they did not attack,” he says, cheerfully.

And if you are still not reassured, take heart from new legislation which (if we survive this year’s ratmaggedon) will relax restrictions on professional pest controllers’ use of more effective poisons, outdoors as well as in.
“If you have rats that are immune to everything apart from these two or three poisons, which can presently only be used indoors, the options are limited. The change that will allow us to use them outside will be a great advantage,” says Davison. Super-rats, beware: you may be about to meet your match.