

Media Release:

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Population of Long-Haired Rats Boom

Recent sightings of the native Long-haired Rat (*Rattus villosissimus*) in Alice Springs and surrounds have excited Scientists from the Department of Natural Resources, Environment, The Arts and Sport (NRETAS).

NRETAS Biodiversity Conservation scientist Peter McDonald, said that the public should be aware of, but not alarmed at, the increased presence of these rats.

“These rats are native and, unlike the common house mice and introduced rats, they are not usually associated with human dwellings. Although introduced black rats (*Rattus rattus*) and brown rats (*Rattus norvegicus*) have turned up in Alice Springs on occasion, neither species has been seen here for more than 15 years.” Mr McDonald said.

“The Long-Haired Rat (*Rattus villosissimus*) is a large grey/brown rodent that normally makes its home on the cracking clay plains of the Barkly Tableland in the Northern Territory and Queensland’s Channel Country.

“They are rarely seen elsewhere in the NT, however we believe that the rise in their population is due to the consecutive seasons of high rainfall.

“These animals are able to breed at quite a rapid rate due to all the fresh roots, stems and leaves that are currently on offer.

Female rats are able to produce a litter of 12 babies every three weeks giving them one of the greatest reproductive potentials of any native rodent.

“The last major population boom in central Australia occurred in the 1970’s when the Long-Haired Rats turned up at Uluru in the Northern Territory, Woomera in South Australia and Wyndham in Western Australia. There’s more frequent smaller booms in the Barkly Tablelands, including one in the early 1990s.”

“This rat species has a very important role in the ecology of these boom and bust areas. Plagues of rats are accompanied by large increases in predators, such as kites, owls and large snakes, which also benefit from a massive increase in the amount of prey available. Unfortunately, these days it can also mean a boom in the number of feral cats.”

Mr McDonald said it’s very rare for this species to reach Alice Springs and it may not happen again for another 20 to 30 years.

“The rodent prefers deep cracking clays or soft friable soils and requires food with high moisture content. We believe that once the weather dries up, the rats will again disappear,” Mr McDonald said.

Residents in Central Australia are reminded that care should be taken if they come across this species as all native fauna in the Northern Territory is protected under the *Territory Parks and Wildlife Conservation Act*.

Media Note – for more information / interviews contact Peter McDonald on 8951 8281

Image – Long-Haired Rat (*Rattus villosissimus*)

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