



Ode to Pack Rats

By Jan Cleere

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The other day I was admiring the desert vista around my Tucson home, watching hummingbirds flit through the backyard, mother and baby cottontail stopping by for a quick snack, a comma-topped quail and desert squirrel sparring for space atop my fence and a furry brown pack rat scurrying across the yard.

While I knew pack rats inhabited the wash surrounding my house, I was also aware these pesky critters would bring more dangerous predators into my territory and must be eliminated.

The pack rat, or wood rat, is the teddy bear of rodents weighing about one pound and rarely growing over 20 inches long including fuzzy tail. Snowy feet blend into a white underbelly with soft brownish-gray fur along its back. Oversized ears and dark cocker-spaniel eyes could melt snow off Mt. Lemmon.

A love of shiny objects compels the pack rat to leave behind a less desirable item when it spots something more to its liking.

The pack rat nest, or midden, is comprised of branches, twigs, cactus joints and whatever else is lying around (a little like my own house). Some are as large as four feet in diameter with underground interlinking chambers.

Paleontologists love to explore ancient middens as their contents can date back thousands of years and contain bundles of trinkets from past civilizations. But these tunnels also cause gardens to collapse into a jumble of uprooted plants

The fur of the pack rat is home to a rather dangerous critter – the amorous kissing bug. This black, one-inch long Dracula-like insect flies at night and loves the soft skin around human lips, planting a big smacker while draining off a tasty supper. Kissing bugs cause reactions in humans ranging from nausea and high fever to delirium.

Once bitten, humans should avoid additional trysts with these loveable bugs as susceptibility to even more dangerous symptoms heightens with every bite.

Rattlesnakes also fancy pack rats albeit as a snack rather than convivial hosts.

Humans are the interlopers in the desert and we should be gracious to the natural inhabitants and their habits, but my tolerance stops at rattler visits.

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Therefore, this chubby rodent scurrying across my backyard must go.

Homeowners can purchase their own traps and humanely remove pack rats, but I preferred to pay an expert any amount of money to handle my pesky predator.

After a frantic call to a local pest control company, a service man appeared and inspected for signs of pack rat invasion. Sure enough, a rather large nest lay hidden behind my overgrown prickly pear garden. He set a trap with peanut butter (a favorite pack rat treat) and we waited.

Two days later, a rather large rat, not at all cuddly, appeared in the cage. My trusty service man took it away to an unknown destination. Since pack rat nests are prime real estate in rodent communities and a homeless pack rat will immediately move into an empty midden, the nest must be destroyed.

Removing a pack rat nest is no easy feat, but within two hours, the nest and a good portion of my cactus garden were gone. We found three rattlesnake skins inside the nest. Whether the snakes had wandered by looking for a tasty snack and shed their skins, or the pack rat had collected the used dermis for a decorative touch, I'll never know.

I once again took my coffee cup outside and waited for more charming critters to entertain me.

But my enjoyment was short lived. Soon another pack rat was roaming my yard having built its nest behind an even larger prickly pear. Along with a daily diet of seeds, yucca pods, bark and berries, pack rats love prickly pear fruit, and my plants produced an overwhelming harvest this year.

I made the call to my friendly service man, put some of his favorite soda on ice and dabbed peanut butter behind my ears.

The trap was again baited. The next morning I found a frightened squirrel, full of peanut butter, impatient to be released from the trap. Rats, no rat today.

Seems like squirrels have a fondness for peanut butter also, for when my service man arrived the following day, he again released the aggravated squirrel from the trap. He decided to dig up the nest anyway hoping to discourage its owner from returning.

The next few weeks I scanned the landscape diligently for signs my unwelcome neighbors had returned.

So far, it's just me, the quail, the rabbits and that crazy squirrel looking for more peanut butter.