

One squeak too many



By Bill Naylor

Mice are often viewed as harmless. The species we're talking about is the grey, long-tailed, nose-twitching house mouse. They're called house mice for good reason. They're homebodies who live

within a yard or two of their food supply, favouring human habitation, and often gain access by simply sauntering across a welcome mat and through the gap provided by an open door or window.

Their climbing ability puts free-style human climbers in the shade. Weighing just a couple of ounces, their long toenails and agility enable them to scale brickwork with ease. They can swim, jump and also tightrope walk along electrical wires (without an umbrella) using their tail to balance. They can even walk upside down on all but the smoothest ceilings and squeeze through a gap the width of pencil.

House mice carry a number of diseases transmittable to humans and family pets. Because they urinate frequently, their fur is greasy and produces a strong scent. They contaminate every surface they touch, hence the black marks along walls and the floor where they commute. If you share your property with mice regular hand washing is essential.

House mice are like distant relatives arriving at Christmas. Once in residence they don't want to leave and providing there is a food source, will

breed prolifically. (Mice not relatives.) Each female can produce 50 young a year, each female youngster can breed at six weeks old.

House mice originated in Asia before they colonised the world, almost always living alongside their favourite animal, humans! If you enjoy a good nightmare, Google 'mouse plagues'. Mice also carry a host of diseases transmittable to humans and wildlife. They have even impacted on the population of one endangered seabird. On the South Atlantic's Gough Island, house mice that reached the sparse rocky islands on sailing ships centuries ago, predate the eggs and chicks of the rare Tristan albatross. They kill thousands of chicks every year by gnawing on their extremities until they bleed to death.

Cats are often recruited for mouse control, but the most dedicated mousers will never eradicate a house mouse colony. Cats also kill wildlife. Trapping will keep the numbers down, but preventing access should be the ultimate goal. Break-back traps are only suitable indoors where wildlife can't reach them. Traps laid close together in threes, facing a wall, where mice habitually run, don't require bait. Some prefer humane traps. But if the prisoner is released within 100 metres of your home, their excellent homing ability will enable them to return the same day, probably with new friends! Poison should only be the very last resort. Anticoagulant rodenticides are a growing problem with birds of prey that ingest poisoned rodents. Always bag and bin a mouse corpse. If poison is used follow the instructions on bait boxes. Above all be vigilant, and take prompt action to avoid the occasional squeaking visitor becoming part of a larger thriving community.

