



Rats running around Windsor signature park: 'They're disgusting'

August 5, 2016, By Brian Cross, Windsor Star

Hopping from rock to rock or scurrying along sidewalks, rats are a common sight in one of Windsor's signature riverfront parks.

"I don't like the look of them. They're disgusting," Haidar Mereb said this week of the bold rodents he and other regulars at Dieppe Gardens have spotted in recent weeks.

Rats seem to be most prevalent along the less travelled and more lush area in the south section of the manicured downtown park, which is popular with tourists and named in honour of members of the Essex-Kent Scottish Regiment killed in the Second World War during the tragic 1942 Dieppe raid.

Will Bucholtz, who visits the park daily, led a Star reporter on a tour of the spots where his tiny Yorkshire terrier Chloe often flushes out the resident rats. They're hiding under the hostas or grasses, he said, or in the crevices between the large rocks that form retaining walls.

One night last week just before dusk, when the park was busy with Pokemon Go players staring at their smartphone screens, a Star reporter watched a rat negotiating the wet stones that border the park's fish pond. Another was spotted walking along a sidewalk leading to the washrooms.



“You’ll see them squirt out and run away,” said Bucholtz, who put Chloe on the ground and watched her “patrol” for rats. “I’ve seen her just go crazy chasing them round and round. It’s entertainment, it’s exercise.”

Bucholtz seemed unfazed by the rats, but the city councillor for the downtown area, Rino Bortolin, says it’s a concern, especially since Dieppe Gardens is frequented by tourists and other out-of-town visitors.

Despite efforts to control them, rats are a continual problem in the downtown, Bortolin said. When he used to own a restaurant in the 300 block of Pellissier Street, he would see “rats the size of dogs” running fearlessly down the alley.

“But when you get to places like the parks that we’re supposed to be grooming and taking care of ... you shouldn’t see that type of stuff there,” he said.



Rats are seen at Dieppe Gardens along Windsor’s riverfront on Aug. 3, 2016.

Dieppe isn’t the only one, said Phil Roberts, executive director of parks. “We do have rat issues in some of our parks. We identify the problem and we react to it.”

A licensed contractor is usually called in. There are also bait stations hidden among the plants in Dieppe Gardens.

While city officials and councilors say there’s been an increase in rat complaints this year, the situation in the parks has been fairly stable, according to Roberts, who said the rat problem at another signature park — Jackson Park — has been pretty much solved this summer.

He said it’s difficult to get rid of rats entirely, especially at a waterfront park where there are storm drains — that rats often occupy — emptying into the Detroit River.

The big concern about rats in Dieppe Gardens is they’re damaging the landscaping — eating plants and bulbs — and their burrows may compromise the integrity of the stone stairs and paving stones. Roberts said while rats inside a house can be a safety concern, having rats in a city park is not.

But he agreed that having rats running around detracts from the beauty of a park. “I guess it does to a degree,” he said. “I’m not going to say rats are beautiful.”

“I think we need to keep our city clean and safe,” said Ward 4 Coun. Ed Sleiman, who recently had a resident in the Ypres Boulevard and George Avenue neighborhood show him several dead rats in McDonald Park.



Robert and Barbara Hart are shown in their backyard on Aug. 5, 2016 with a rat trap they regularly use.

Barbara Hart, who lives in the 1700 block of Hickory Road, said she regularly sees rats climb a chain-link fence to get to her birdbath. “It’s ridiculous. You’re sitting in your backyard watching these rats come and go,” she said.

She suspects the rat “epidemic” is linked to a decrease in skunks (that eat young rats) after the city made hard-sided garbage containers mandatory in 2014 and efforts to control the number of feral cats roaming core neighbourhoods.

“I haven’t seen a skunk in a while, I haven’t seen a feral cat all summer, and now we have all these rats going in our birdbath in the middle of the day,” Hart said. “It’s unnerving.”

Rat rage

The problem: Dieppe Gardens isn’t the only place in Windsor where rats seem more prevalent this summer. Complaints to the city’s 311 call centre about the rodents are up. In the first six months of 2016, the city fielded 788 calls about rats. In all of 2015 there were 1,488 complaints.



A rat is seen hiding among the stones at Dieppe Gardens along Windsor’s riverfront on Aug. 3, 2016

The cause: The overall rat population is probably higher due to a mild winter, said Adrian Busa, Windsor's acting manager of environmental services. (The number of complaints decreased in 2014 after the city required residents to use hard-sided garbage containers.) The fact there's been a rise in calls during the summer when there normally aren't as many problems points to the dry weather and rats coming out to look for water, said Chris Ortner, branch manager for pest control company Orkin Canada.

The worst areas: The vast majority of rat complaints come from the area roughly bounded by Sandwich Street, the Detroit River, Ford City and Tecumseh Road, said Ward 3 Coun. Rino Bortolin. Ward 2 Coun. John Elliott has asked city officials to look into rat complaints he's fielded from residents on Wigle Avenue, Lena Avenue and Barrymore Lane. One resident has lived there 47 years and had never seen rats until now, Elliott said. Another trapped 11 of them. "It's one thing to see them running around in the night, but when you see them coming out in the broad daylight, that's different," he said.

Coun. Ed Sleiman said rat problems is the biggest complaint he receives from residents of Ward 4.

Another irritant: Bortolin said he's had about 10 per cent more complaints than last year. Callers are upset about a council budget decision to levy a \$100 charge for having a licensed contractor hired by the city place baits around private property a maximum of four times. The service used to be free.

"At the end of the day, these are the small types of programs that improve the quality of life for residents in the core," Bortolin said.



A rat is seen running across the walkway at Dieppe Gardens along Windsor's riverfront on Aug. 3, 2016.