

The Seattle Times

You've been warned: There's no summer break for rats in toilets

July 14, 2016 at 9:48 , *By Evan Bush*

Rats are one of the most reviled (and successful) urban-wildlife nuisances. One route into your home? The toilet.

Rats don't crawl up toilets with regularity in Seattle, but for those unlucky enough to experience it, the memory bites.

"I now feel utterly unsafe in my own home," wrote a Magnolia resident in a note to the King County Public Health Department.

"It's a life-changing experience if it happens to you," said Don Pace, a rodent-control specialist for King County's Public Health Department. "It does freak you out, because you're not expecting it."

King County provided a log of about 400 complaints about toilet rats over the past decade, and Pace said the department deals with between 50 and 80 toilet-rat scenarios each year.

Spreaders of disease, rats are one of the most reviled (and successful) urban wildlife nuisances. They certainly don't help their reputations by invading the privacy of your bathroom.

"We try to tell people not to panic — all you have to do is close the lid and flush. The rat will try to swim (back down) or get tired and drown," Pace said.

It might take more than one flush to exile the furry intruders, typically Norway rats about 6-8 inches long (12 inches if you include their tails).

Pace has been helping people vanquish toilet rats for more than 20 years in King County.

“I feel like a superhero because everyone’s happy when they see me,” he said.

Usually, the story goes something like this:

“Heard a splashing noise at 1:30 a.m. in the toilet. Looked in to see a rat doing laps. Within five minutes it had disappeared,” read one entry in the department’s complaint database.

Another complainant wrote in:

“I have the unfortunate duty to report that I found a rat in my toilet bowl this evening (7/1/2013). It is quite alive, and unhappy to be where it is. ... I’ll try using dish soap and flushing. If that doesn’t work, I guess I’ll look for heavy leather gloves and see if I can remove it that way.”

“Wife heard scrabbling noises in toilet,” described another. “Lifted lid and saw rat. She screamed! Flushed three times and rat disappeared. Then squirted dish soap down toilet and flushed twice more. Then poured bleach down kitchen sink followed by boiling water.”

The dish-soap method mentioned above works, Pace said. The soap breaks the surface tension in the toilet bowl and makes it difficult for the rat to swim.

If someone reports a toilet rat to the county, Pace will typically drop poison bait into a nearby manhole cover to address any other rats who might be considering invasion.

It's probably best to avoid drawing rats in the first place. Pace said rats are typically chasing food poured down the drain, but detour to porcelain because they can't access the sink.

"They come up where they find easiest access: the toilet bowl," he said.

Whether you live in a mansion with a lake view or a modest apartment, it doesn't matter. Toilet rats are egalitarian.

"Every house has a kitchen sink," Pace said. "It happens throughout Seattle, from the far south end all the way up to the north end."

Clean your drain regularly, Pace said. A cup of baking soda, a cup of vinegar and a rinse of boiling water ought to work.

Complaints typically begin to rise in the spring, with most coming in summer and fall. But even during peak season, chances are slim a rat will come visit.

That said — will you still leave the toilet seat up?