

The number of rodent queries have risen over five consecutive years and were 37.3% higher in 2020 than in 2015.

Experts suggest part of the increase can be attributed to warmer weather, which can create favourable conditions for rats and mice to produce more litters in a season and survive the winters that naturally curtail numbers.

According to the data from Rentokil Pest Control, online rodent inquiries rose by 37% in 2020 – the year of the rat under the Chinese zodiac – compared with 2019.

Business closures and lockdowns as a result of the coronavirus outbreak may have also helped create favourable conditions for the animals. Extreme weather events may also impact rodent populations and enquiries.

In particular, flooding usually displaces the creatures as their burrows are destroyed and they seek shelter indoors.

According to Rentokil, last year storms Ciara and Dennis caused a spike in rodent enquiries and pest controllers are warning the damage inflicted by Storm Christoph could mean numbers continue to rise.

Paul Blackhurst, head of technical academy at Rentokil Pest Control, said: “Warmer average temperatures are a boon for rodents – usually bringing more sources of food and opportunities to breed and survive outdoors, out of sight from humans.

“It means populations are larger in winter when it is harder for them to survive.

“This is usually when they make their way into people’s homes or other premises, in search of safe harbourage, food and water.

“Temporary business closures and lockdowns as a result of the coronavirus pandemic may have also helped create favourable conditions for rodents in 2020.”

He added that the data suggests rodent activity remained relatively consistent throughout the year, rather than the more traditional spikes during the cooler months.

Mr Blackhurst said: “The quieter streets and unoccupied buildings offered shelter and opportunities to exist undisturbed.

“It also contributed to a unique scenario where rodents became more frequently spotted during daylight hours, despite being timid and nocturnal creatures. “This situation is likely to be created by increasing nest sizes, forcing less dominant rodents out of the nest in search of new opportunities to feed and breed.

He warned that a milder winter and changes in human behaviour due to lockdown, combined with large-scale flooding, could create a perfect storm for rodents to migrate indoors in larger numbers.

Mr Blackhurst said: “The most important thing residents and businesses can do to prevent a rodent problem is to inspect their properties for any potential entry points.

“Once inside, managing a rodent population can be particularly challenging.

“Anything larger than the width of a biro should be sealed with caulk and wire wool, or covered with metal kick-plates, so rodents can’t gnaw their way inside.”