



RATS ON THE PARKWAY!

A Fairmount resident's encounter with rodents—in broad daylight!—sent her on an odyssey to get city action. Here's what happened ... and what you can do about Philly pests, too.

Rats, I am sorry to inform you, are very likely enjoying big-city life far more than most of us right now. We're hunkered down for a pandemic winter, socially distancing and working our way through the Netflix catalog; they're out cavorting in public parks, soaking in some Vitamin D, enjoying meals with friends, and marveling (one might imagine) at the relative lack of car and foot traffic that's heretofore spoiled their fun.

This is, at least, what I have witnessed on the Ben Franklin Parkway, Philly's so-called Champs-Élysées, which is now also Rat Central. On several occasions over the past couple months, I have spotted (and screamed at, ran from, and recorded) dozens of rats on the stretch of land between Sister Cities Park and Shakespeare Park, the beautiful open plaza in front of the Free Library.

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James Garrow, the director of communications for the Philadelphia Department of Health, is an amiable guy who is less surprised to hear about the Parkway rats than he is to hear that it took Vector so long to call back. “They usually get back in a day or so,” Garrow says. (This actually does reflect my previous Vector experiences.)

As it happens, rat complaints are down right now. This past January, Vector Control had 183 reports, compared to 209 over the same period last year—and beyond that, all of 2020 actually saw fewer complaints, at 2,526, than previous years (3,042 in 2019 and 3,025 in 2018).

Given that complaints are down, you might think Vector would have less to do, but you'd be wrong. Garrow says that complaints are simply an issue of what people actually see, as opposed to an accurate reflection of rat life.

“We've actually talked with a few other cities,” he says. “You know, even in New York City and New Orleans, where, at the beginning of the pandemic, we were reading about rats going crazy. But now, after a few months of data, they're saying their complaints are down overall, too.”

New York City, by the way, is reportedly home to some 2 million rats, but when it comes to similar estimates in Philly, neither Garrow nor Vector will venture even a ballpark figure—too

hard to accurately calculate, the Vector pros consistently tell Garrow. In October, though, the pest-control company Orkin did rank Philadelphia as the 7th “rattiest” city in America, sandwiched between Detroit and Baltimore, and lagging four slots behind New York, which fell after Chicago and L.A.

Garrow will say this: “Every big city in the world deals with rats. And in a city as old as ours, well this is part of it. The sewers are old, the buildings, the housing stock.”

Michelle Niedermeier, the Community Integrated Pest Management and Environmental Health Program coordinator for the state’s urban pest management outreach office, takes it one degree further: “There are a number of reasons we have rats,” she says. “We’re built on streams that got put into concrete tubes, and so we essentially created a habitat for them. And they’re commensal rodents, meaning they eat from our tables.” In short, she says, “we make it easy for rats to be near us.” The good news here? Philadelphia is one the few cities left, she says, that has a rat control unit. (Well, it’s good news for Philly, anyway.)

Here’s a silver lining for you to contemplate: Our rats are just your basic sewer rats. People in the Pacific Northwest also regularly deal with something called “roof rats” that live in trees and, yes, come at a house from above. And if that doesn’t make you marginally happier to be a Philadelphian, I don’t know what to tell you.

Anyway, Garrow says, if sightings are down, that’s likely thanks to the fact that rats might need people but they hate to be around them. And during a pandemic, of course, there are far fewer people to avoid than before. Somewhere like the Parkway, where there’s usually a ton of cars and people, he says, “the rats were there, but hiding all the time.” Now, with fewer threats, “the rats are braver.”

Niedermeier, for her part, says she’s not sure it’s about being emboldened as much as it is about being “opportunistic.” That there are more rats out and about in different areas is, she believes, what it has always been about to the rats: food and water and shelter.

If the on-and-off restaurant shutdowns have meant less food in, say, the Sansom street dumpsters, the rats will simply go where there is more food. “You have to really credit them for being so adaptive and intelligent,” Niedermeier says cheerfully.

And as far as shelter goes? This is where Vector comes back in, Garrow says: Anywhere there are low-lying plants and natural ground cover, rats can burrow and “really thrive.”

“There’s no official term for them, but we do know there are places where the rats tend to harbor”—places with lots of low plants and bushes that tend to look great and fill out a garden and not need a ton of upkeep. Places like our parks, in other words. Rittenhouse Square. The

grounds of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. The garden around Eastern State Penitentiary. Franklin Square. And, yes, the Parkway. There are a great number of these places all over the city.

“And so we’re out focusing more and doing regular checkups and baiting in these places, especially now that they’re lower in traffic, which means the rats are getting bolder in expanding their area and creating more burrows.” (Baiting, in case you’re curious, involves putting poison some 18 inches below the ground, down into the burrows. The poison makes the rats thirsty; they come up for water, and the water activates the poison.)