

Ship Rat, *Rattus rattus*



Overview

Short description of *Rattus rattus*, Ship Rat

The large size and long, thin, almost hairless tail distinguish rats from other grey-brown rodents. Water voles are smaller and darker brown, with shorter ears, a furry tail and a blunter snout. The ship rat is slimmer than the brown rat, with relatively longer ears: its uniformly coloured tail is always longer than the head and body length combined.

Description of *Rattus rattus*, Ship Rat status in GB

Formerly widespread and abundant in GB, the ship rat is currently restricted to the Shiant Islands and to a small section of the Thames Estuary.

Habitat summary: *Rattus rattus*, Ship Rat

Ship rats were formerly found in a very wide range of habitat types in GB, typically in association with man. They now occur mainly in seaports, with an isolated population in the Hebrides.

Overview table

Environment:	Terrestrial
Species status:	Non-Native
Native range:	Indian Subcontinent, Pakistan
Functional type:	Omnivore
Status in England:	Non-Native
Status in Scotland:	Non-Native
Status in Wales:	Non-Native
Location of first record:	London
Date of first record:	250 250

Invasion history: *Rattus rattus*, Ship Rat

Origin

The original distribution of the ship rat was probably India, from where it spread westward to Egypt by the 4th century BC and subsequently to Europe.

First Record

Remains have been found in Roman settlements in GB dating from as early as the 3rd century BC.

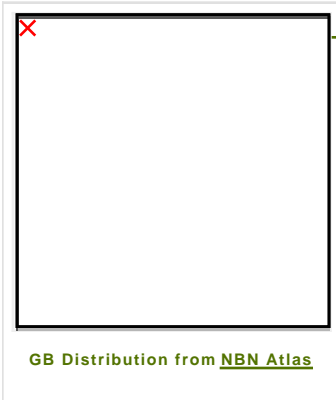
Pathway and Method

Ship rats can thrive on ships at sea and come ashore in ports or through shipwrecks. The first arrivals are believed to have been with the Romans and the Vikings. Shipborne arrivals continue in GB ports.

Species Status

The ship rat is highly invasive and is regarded as a serious pest in many countries, especially in warmer climates where it appears better able to co-exist with or outcompetes the brown rat. In New Zealand, where there are no native land

Distribution map



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mammals, the ship rat has become a widespread arboreal predator in native forests. Having been widespread in GB, it was eventually displaced almost completely by the brown rat.

Ecology & Habitat: *Rattus rattus*, Ship Rat

Dispersal Mechanisms

Ship rats have spread around the world through their readiness to travel in ships. They are poorer swimmers than brown rats and are less likely to disperse naturally to and from offshore islands.

Reproduction

Ship rats breed from March to November, each female producing up to five litters a year, each averaging about seven young. Females mature sexually after just 12–16 weeks.

Known Predators/Herbivores

Ship rats fall prey to a variety of avian and mammalian predators, including owls, domestic cats and dogs, and foxes.

Resistant Stages

None.

Habitat Occupied in GB

Ship rats occupy warehouses and other buildings in seaport areas and, being better climbers, are more likely than brown rats to be found in roof spaces. Following shipwrecks, they have survived well on seabird islands.

Distribution: *Rattus rattus*, Ship Rat

Strong populations exist in the Shiant Islands, until they were recently extirpated, on Lundy Island. Ship rats survive in some seaport areas, such as at Tilbury.

Impacts: *Rattus rattus*, Ship Rat

Environmental Impact

Ship rats have contributed to many extinctions or near-extinctions of island endemic species and particularly of seabird colonies. In GB they present a serious threat to seabirds on the Shiant Islands.

Health and Social Impact

Ship rats can spread a number of diseases to humans through their bites and droppings, including leptospirosis (Weil's disease). Inside buildings, rats can cause considerable nuisance through fouling surfaces and water tanks, gnawing timbers and wiring, and through their noise and aggression.

Economic Impact

Ship rats previously had major economic impacts through their consuming and contamination of foodstuffs in storage and through damage to property. The species is now very rare in GB, however, and its impacts are much reduced.

References & Links: *Rattus rattus*, Ship Rat

Identification

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Biology, ecology, spread, vectors

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Management and impact

General

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