

Rat lovers, owners band together

Rising from pest to pet

By James Barron
New York Times News Service

NEW YORK — Raquel Cintron learned the hard way that it does not pay to tell the men she goes out with that she has rats in her apartment. She did that once, and it ruined the romance.

"His response was, 'Oh, that doesn't sound good,'" she said. "But he wasn't my type, anyway."

The little relationship-wreckers that she confessed to having are not the sewer or subway variety. They do not creep out from the walls uninvited, scurry around menacingly and chow down on crumbs under the dining room table. No, her rats live the good life. They are her pets.

Pet rats

In New York city, where municipal agencies spend more than \$5 million a year spreading rat poison, where runners in Central Park scurry at the sight of rats out on a constitutional and where David Letterman jokes about sharing the Ed Sullivan Theatre with rats "as big as cats," there are people with pet rats. Mice, too.

Just as no one knows how many rats live beneath sidewalks or behind apartment walls, no one can say how many pet rats are out there, sniffing around cages and coming to attention when owners call their names.

But the number is clearly more than a handful. After all, New York now has its own chapter of the Northeast Rat and Mouse Club International, a Pennsylvania-based group of rat owners that claims 300 members from Vermont to Virginia.

They subscribe to newsletters with stop-the-presses headlines like Rats: The Perfect Pet for the '90s or Death by Cheerio (about a mouse that apparently choked on a tiny O-shaped piece of cereal). They attend rat shows. (If there are cat shows and dog shows, they say, why not rat shows?)

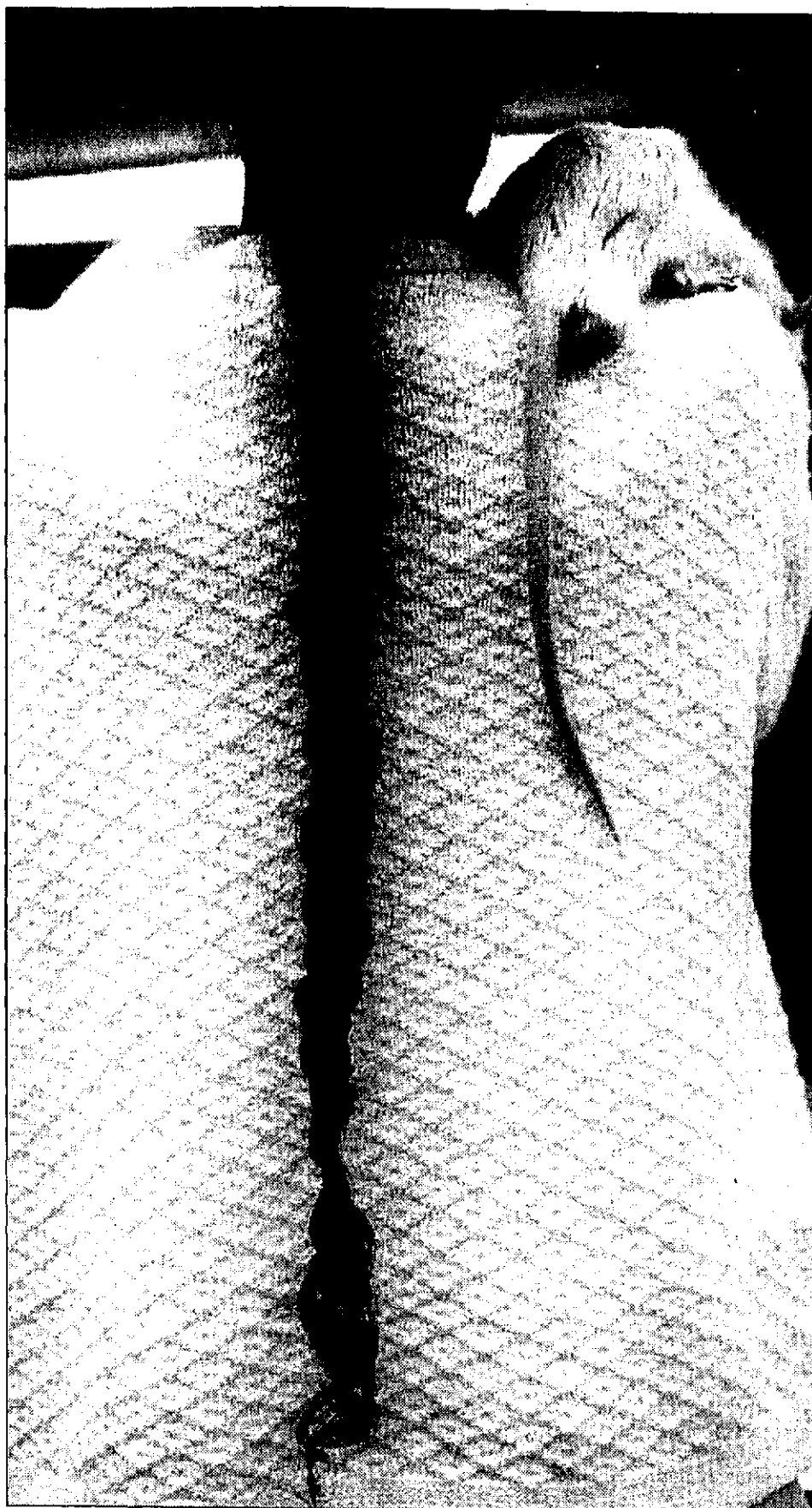
And they attend bimonthly meetings of the three-month-old New York city chapter, a kind of show-and-tell period where there are no minutes to, uh, ratify and where "new business" is as likely to centre on nutritional tips as on how much to charge for dues.

The meetings draw between 10 and 20 rat and mouse owners and about 100 rats and mice, but the mice at a recent Sunday meeting were wriggling around so fast that some of them may have been counted more than once. Maybe even more than twice.

But there are never any James Cagney impersonators whispering "you dirty rat" — because Rat and Mouse Club International members insist that their rats are clean.

"I would not have a subway rat in my house," said Catherine Marois, who has two rats she rescued from a crack den in the East Village. "I've seen rats down there: disgusting, vicious, covered with lice and disease. It's like a regular dog versus a wild dog. One you want in your back yard, the other you don't want to be anywhere near."

In other words, everything turns on the



Raquel Cintron and her pet rat show off their respective tails.

one-letter difference between pest and pet.

"The moment you say 'rat,' people get a look on their face like they heard you wrong," Marois said. "Then they're grossed out. I've had people come over and look at the cage and say, 'What's in there?' and I say, 'Oh, never mind.'"

Even Debbie Ducommun, who founded

the Rat Fan Club, a California-based rival of the Rat and Mouse Club International, concedes that rats have a public relations problem. "The cloud in the silver lining," she called it in her newsletter, The Rat Report.

"Being rodents, they can have a tendency to chew on things," she wrote. "Another annoyance is their habit of

urine-marking. They will often leave tiny drops of urine where they walk to mark their territory."

No big deal, Ducommun declared. "The spots of urine do not stain fabrics and are easily wiped up from hard surfaces," she wrote. "A washable throw cover can protect furniture."

But what about rats as disease carriers? Didn't rats spread the bubonic plague in Europe? No, rat lovers say, the culprits were infected fleas that bit the rats.

"There are probably more diseases spread from dogs to humans than from rats to humans," said Dr. Rob Voss, the associate curator in the department of mammalogy at the American Museum of Natural History.

Rat and Mouse Club

And the New York City Health Department has no rules against keeping domesticated rats.

What the humans did to the rats at the Rat and Mouse Club meeting was to kiss them. At least, Cindee Steinbrecher did. The owner of two champagne-coloured rats (Daddy Boss Newton and Baby Boss Newton), she is the science teacher at St. Luke's School in Greenwich Village and arranged for the club to use her classroom as a meeting place.

It is hard to say who in the group has the most rats and mice. Betty Silver said she once had 51 rats and 100 mice. "One by one by one, they died," she said, and now she has none.

The youngest person at the meeting was Dustin Ersek-Mull, 7. "This is the first club he's ever been a member of," declared his grandfather, Barry Ersek, who is the superintendent of Schools in Haddonfield, N.J., and who said that the group provided a "positive way of reinforcing relationships."

"Having a rat as a pet or knowing someone who does lets you know how stereotypical thinking can contaminate your thought process," Ersek said. "I've learned to be suspicious of stereotypes as a result of getting close to a rat." Not in the subway, but in his daughter's Manhattan apartment.

ONE THING was clear: these rats are treated like gourmets. "The only reason I eat well is I have to cook for them," Cintron said.

"It's like having a husband. He's going to want his food, so you eat well too. I don't wear gloves, don't wear a mask, I've hardly ever been sick and after 13 rats, I can say they tend to be healthy animals, especially if you take care of them. And that means doing all the normal things one does for human living: cleanliness, good diet and exercise."

Exercise? "Yeah, I used to have mine running on wheels," she said. "Then I read in a book that a rat running in a wheel can injure its tail very badly, so I'm not using a wheel. But I'm not letting them run in the apartment. This could be a problem."

Marois also has a dog, Livia. "Sometimes she licks them," she said, "but I don't think it's too good to do that on a regular basis." She paused, then added, "They're not ratsicles, after all."

Be realistic about selection of pet

By Gary Wilkes
Cox News Service

MY DOG, Megan, is a pure-bred Australian cattle dog. Twelve years ago, she was taken to an animal shelter because her behaviour was completely unacceptable.

She was on death row for the heinous offence of chasing livestock — a task she was genetically designed to do.

In the world of canines, this scenario is common. Many dogs are unfairly classified as behavioural misfits. Terriers that dig holes, beagles that bay at the moon, and retrievers that kill birds are good examples of dogs that are condemned for displaying perfectly normal, but often unacceptable, behaviour.

Ironically, most of these behaviours are both prized and despised by humans. The farm terrier that kills small animals is highly valued, while a city pooch that performs the same behaviour may be branded as vicious. Beagles whose baying can be heard for miles earn praise from a hunter and a criminal charge from the urban pet owner.

Ignorance

Though simple ignorance is usually blamed for this paradox, the facts do not support that assumption. A person who buys an Alaskan malamute invariably brags that they are used as sled dogs. This claim is usually left unfinished as their dog drags them briskly down the street like a sack of potatoes.

The same owner who revels in the fact that their pit bull terrier comes from a lineage of fighting dogs is apparently mystified when Chopper kills the neighbour's Shi Tzu.

It is obvious that the owners are simultaneously proud and apologetic for the same behaviours.

The real culprit in this cross-species dilemma is probably not ignorance, but fantasy. A common reason for picking a particular breed is not the reality of the animal's behavioural traits, but the image it will project to others.

Books about various breeds and species of pets pander to this process. Giant breeds, such as the neopolitan mastiff, are often described in terms such as "powerful" and "fiercely loyal." Border collies are reputed to be "intelligent" and "obedient." The animal is selected because of the slogans attached to it, not because of any actual knowledge of the breed.

Most often, basing the selection of an animal on reputation leads to problems. The regal looking mastiff will grow to be a 170-pound, slobbering beast, who may casually eat the neighbour's cat and splatter long tendrils of drool on the walls.

Each animal will offer perfectly normal behaviour that represents the reality behind its image. The unprepared owner will be frustrated and disappointed that the dog does not live up to unrealistic expectations.

Selecting a dog based on real, rather than imagined, qualities is the first step toward building a successful relationship. If you are considering acquiring a dog, these suggestions may help you decide which kind to get.

■ Examine your lifestyle objectively before you decide to choose a pet. If you work 80 hours a week, a goldfish may be too much of a responsibility. Most dogs are dynamic creatures which need mental stimulation and physical activity. If you really want a behaviourally robust animal, such as a Doberman or an Irish setter, you should consider waiting until you can devote more time to a pet.

■ Research the type of pet you want, before you buy or adopt. Do not automatically get books or magazines that are written by enthusiasts. Even the most objective person may unintentionally exaggerate an animal's good points while minimizing the bad.

■ If there is a local club or organization for the type of animal you want, see if you can attend a meeting or get to know some of the members. Seeing one perfectly behaved Tasmanian devil does not give you enough knowledge to assume all such creatures are well behaved.

■ See if you can actually borrow a similar pet from a breeder or friend. Many humane organizations and rescue clubs are looking for foster homes for pets. They may welcome an offer to have you temporarily care for a misplaced animal. Actually caring for an animal is the best way to know if you have made the right selection.

Gary Wilkes is an animal behaviour specialist, newspaper and magazine columnist and author.

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YOU MEAN I HAVE PARASITES

by Raven Brazzell (You know ... number one pet and all)

If you ask me I don't know what all the fuss is about. I mean all of my friends do it. What is "it" you ask ... why eat poop of course. There is just nothing tastier or more fun to play with than a **poopsicle**; whether it's from a doggie, a kitty cat or even a rabbit or deer. But get a load of this ... my ever health conscious owner, tells me that this habit could get me into a lot of trouble. Trouble because there are lots of parasites in poop. He also tells me that poop is not the only source of parasites for me and my friends and that we should only eat the special foods that we are given. Now what kind of fun is that!! I just cannot imagine going for my walkies and not sampling some of the delicacies along the way. Oh, Oh, here he comes. I better start writing what he tells me to or I am not going to get my bedtime treats.

What I am supposed to tell you is that worm infections (internal parasites) continue to be a major problem in dogs and cats. Why? Because prevention is often inadequate and there seems to be a tremendous lack of awareness of the problem. The result is that both my friends and all of their owners are at risk for developing infections. The main parasites that we should all be concerned with are **roundworms, tapeworms, whipworms and hookworms**, although there are many others ... yuck!! I am supposed to be concerned because I like to "taste" poops. People are supposed to be concerned because dogs and cats can transmit these parasites through close contact, licking people's faces or by pooping in areas where children may be playing ... like a sandbox. In fact, in the United States

some 10,000 cases of roundworm infection in people are diagnosed annually. Gee, I guess this isn't anything to joke about. Excuse me while I go and chat with Dr. Paul ... there must be some way that we can help pets and people alike.

PAUSE

Okay, I think that I understand what must be done. First of all, you pet owners must have your pet's poops checked at least once a year for parasites. This means that you will have to collect a fresh specimen prior to visiting your Veterinarian, or better yet, your Veterinarian can collect it while you are at the Hospital. My owner loves to do this ... but not as much as express anal glands (tee hee). In addition, you should give serious consideration to deworming your pets on a regular basis. This means about every three months. Take it from me, the deworming pills are no problem to swallow. Dr. Paul tells me that if everybody chips in, we can make a real difference. So I will do my part ... no more poops. I will also tell maverick and Samantha to spread the word.

Well, I hope that I have done good, because all this writing has worked my appetite into a frenzy!

Dr. Brazzell practices Veterinary medicine at the Tuxedo Animal Hospital in Winnipeg. If you have questions or comments you may reach him at his E-mail address paul@tuxedo.com.

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Wounded dog can't sign his gift cheques

Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO — A Scottweiler who took a bullet for his owner while protecting him from burglars is now a wealthy dog, but he can't sign his cheques.

The dog, named Hakuna Matada, required shoulder surgery to remove the bullet. Also, hundreds of people who heard the story donated more than \$30,000.

The problem is that most made their cheques out to Hakuna Matada and unfortunately, there's no way the dog can cash them.

Police are trying to contact contributors to see if they want to create a Hakuna Matada fund so the money can go to other animals requiring medical treatment.

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