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Transgenic Mice, More on Debbie Ducommon & The Rat Fan Club, Extinct Bay Area Critter Is Alive, or Is It...?, RMHF Member Joyce Starkey Looks into Chromium and Rodent Lifespan, Rat Bone Jewelry?, AND MORE...

Kendra Davis holds her rat, Worf. See story on page 2

Moss Beach artist judges who wins and loses the real rat race

This is another in an occasional series of articles featuring people in unusual jobs in San Mateo County.

By SHERRY POSNICK-GOODWIN
Times Staff Writer

The rat race of the corporate world has never appealed to Kendra Davis. Instead, she enjoys leisurely looking at rats in their cages — as well as mice and hamsters — searching for blue-ribbon rodents.

Contrary to popular opinion, she said, you can't smell a rat — unless it's a really dirty rat. But you can smell a mouse.

"The bucks (males) smell musty," she said, "but the females hardly smell at all."

Davis, a Moss Beach resident, should know. She is a professional rodent judge and breeder.

She has traveled the country on the rodent-competition circuit, getting paid to judge the critters on physical characteristics, poise and personality.

It may not be widely known, but there are competitions to rate rodents similar to judgments for dogs, cats and horses. They are attended by breeders, hobbyists and aficionados.

We're not talking about your garden variety of house mouse or field mouse here. We're talking breeding that may go hundreds of generations to lineage from the royal rodents of Europe. Some of the more refined may even have pedigrees.

It all started, said Davis, when English rats and mice were put on treadmills to spin cotton at the mills. When they became unemployed with the advent of the industrial revolution, some people took a fancy to the prettier ones. They became known as fanciers.



"They started breeding the fancy mice and judging them," she explained. "Some of the mice have pedigrees longer than those of race horses."

When Davis judges, she takes the rat, mouse or hamster from its cage and examines it closely, rating the animal poor, fair, good or excellent on numerous characteristics.

Carriage, or how the animal holds its body, is a big consideration. So are markings, the set of the tail and ears, whiskers, coat and temperament. An animal who isn't purebred may be

disqualified. Blindness, sores, an extra toe or disease are also grounds for dismissal.

Then there are those special standouts, said Davis, who just run circles around the competition.

"I had this white standard mouse, a buck, who won three best-of-shows in a row," she recalled proudly. "He would hold himself up and put his ears in a perfect position and just take the show. He knew how to strut. Sometimes you get one who knows he's beautiful and loves to show it off."

Rats, she said, are much smarter than people give them credit for.

"They can be box trained, do tricks, sit up and even be trained to walk across wires," she said.

Rodents are gaining in popularity as pets, she noted, because

much of the population does not have the time or living space to devote to larger animals.

"I think everyone needs to have pets, and not everyone can have a larger animal," she said.

To be a true judge of rodents, a breeder's background is usually required. Davis has been breeding rats and mice for years, selling them to pet stores and entering others in competitions.

Her specialty is recessive-gene breeding, producing "satin frizzy" mice with shiny but frizzy coats, and those with Dutch markings, with circles around the eyes and sock-like markings on the feet.

Not all of her brood make it to market. Those who are too small, unfriendly or unfit are fed to her pet snakes.

"Everybody has to eat," said Davis philosophically. "Those (animals) that aren't good enough should have a purpose, and that can be to feed other animals."

Her interest in breeding led her to become a founding member of the Rat, Mice and Hamster Fanciers, which sponsors many of the competitions she judges.

(Upcoming shows include: April 25, Rats, Mice and Hamsters, Petco, 3517 Mount Diablo Blvd., Lafayette; June 26, Rats, Mice and Hamsters, Alameda County Fair, Pleasanton; and Oct. 9, Rabbits, Mice, Hamsters, Rabbits and Cavies, Santa Clara County Fairgrounds, San Jose. All shows begin at 10 a.m.)

The group has five mouse judges, four rat and four hamster judges. She is the only member qualified to judge all three categories.

The criteria for becoming a judge is strict. One must demonstrate proficiency in breeding five varieties of each animal,

then serve an apprenticeship under five judges and be officially recommended by three of them for judgeship. Written and oral tests on standards of perfection must be passed. The process can take more than two years.

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Rats

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Despite the rigorous standards, said Davis, "judging is an art and not a science. I can only give my opinion of these animals as I perceive them."

Judging may be fun, but it's not especially lucrative. "It does not pay well. It's one of those jobs you do because you love it," said Davis.

In addition to her judging fee, her travel expenses and meals are paid for by the competition's organizers.

Davis, 38, is a mother of two and an artist. But when people find out about her other line of work, they are often surprised.

"A lot of people say they had no idea I do this," she said. "They think it's a bit eccentric and funny because . . . well, it is. But they can also see I'm serious about it."

She is well aware that a large part of the human population is repulsed by the animals that she finds so charming.

"Many people don't like rats because of their tails," she commented. "Their tails look like snakes and they hate snakes. But no one should have a natural fear of animals that are domesticated and clean. Breeders are trying to make people less afraid through education and exposure to them."

She added, "Wild rodents, on the other hand, can be dangerous. They may bite and have rabies. Frankly, if a wild mouse ran out from under my refrigerator, I'd jump, too."

Area biologist smells a rat, says extinct critter is alive

By James Bruggers
Staff writer

8-19-92 CTimes

A Lafayette wildlife biologist believes he has identified a specimen of the Berkeley kangaroo rat, an East Bay native thought to be extinct for more than 40 years.

The animal was found dead this summer by a park aide in Sunol Regional Wilderness, said biologist Gary Beeman, who began searching for the rodents in 1987.

Beeman said he's "90 percent sure" it's a Berkeley kangaroo rat.

But there is a possibility it could be another type of kangaroo rat that looks very similar, he said Thursday.

Experts at UC-Berkeley will examine the bone structure of the animal's skull to make a final determi-

SUBMITTED BY LAURA SUTER CONRA COSTA TIMES, AUG 19, 1992

Rat

nation.

"There has been an incredible amount of trapping (for the species) over the years," said Ron Russo, head naturalist for East Bay Regional Parks District. "Everybody has turned up nothing. If all of a sudden one of these rats turns up dead, that would be pretty extraordinary."

Russo noted, however, that the trapping took place in the Berkeley Hills where the species was last known to exist and not in the Sunol wilderness south of Pleasanton.

Kangaroo rats, which hop like kangaroos, aren't of the sewer variety from Europe feared by health officials.

"These are very clean animals," Beeman said. "They don't bite like a normal rat. They are shy, almost timid animals — very cuddly."

The Berkeley rats were named in the late 1800s by a university professor and Berkeley resident whose cat dragged one back to his house at the end of Dwight Way, Beeman said.

The species was thought to be wiped out by pesticides used to kill ground squirrels, he said.

BERKELEY KANGAROO RAT

- About 12 inches long
- Moves in kangaroo fashion
- Long, bushy tail
- Brownish-gray back, rear thigh stripe



Source: Gary Beeman

Times

Kangaroo rats eat seeds from grasses and are prey for larger animals, filling a vital link in the food chain, he said.

If it turns out Berkeley rats still exist, Beeman said he hopes to move some of them to Mount Diablo as part of a plan announced earlier this year to return native plants and animals to Mt. Diablo State Park.

The discovery, if verified, also could have profound land-use implications.

If listed as endangered, it would gain government protection similar to that given the San Joaquin kit fox, salt marsh harvest mouse and Mission Blue butterfly.

SEE FOLLOW-UP STORY ("KANGAROO RAT") ON PAGE 9

SAN FRANCISCO EXAMINER

Dilbert By Scott Adams

