

## The Brown Rat

**Scientific Name:** *Rattus norvegicus*

**Irish Name:** Francach donn

By Vicky West



The Brown Rat, part of the rodent family, is Ireland's most common rodent. It originated in South East Asia and spread around the world travelling on ships as a stowaway, reaching Ireland in the 1700s. It is a small mammal which typically has brown-greyish fur, with a lighter white patch on its chest. Rats are highly adaptable to most habitats, but prefer to live close to humans as this provides them with a regular food source. They tend to live underground in burrows, which are a network of pathways and rooms for nesting and food storage.

Rats are omnivorous and feed on almost anything edible.

They prefer starch and protein-rich foods such as grains and seed, but will also eat scavenged meat, fish, weeds, vegetables, nuts, fruits and other plant material. Brown rats also eat insects and other invertebrates, birds and their eggs, fish, and other small animals such as mice and young rabbits. They have also been known to attack larger animals, such as poultry and young lambs.



Image courtesy of www.nps.gov

Some people estimate that there are five rats for every human being on the earth and that wherever you are, there is a rat within 15 metres.

### Family



Breeding generally occurs between March and November but can happen all year round. Females can have as

many as 13 litters a year, with pups being born after just three weeks. Each litter normally has between 6-9 pups, which are blind and naked at birth, and weigh less than 6 grams. It takes about one week for them to develop fur and two weeks for them to open their eyes.

Rats have a variety of predators such as owls, foxes, stoats, and domestic cats and dogs and so have a 90% mortality rate, with most not living past 18 months.

### Other Facts...

- Rats can use a sense called *thigmotaxis*, which is where it uses muscle memory and sense of touch to take exactly the same route every time it searches for food.
- Can communicate via ultrasound - especially a female to her pups.
- Very strong bones and hind leg muscles so can jump quite high.
- Size - total length 31-48cm. Body length up to 28cm.
- Mainly nocturnal but does scavenge during the day.
- Live in small groups within a hierarchy, with larger rats being more dominant.



### A Deadly Cousin!

Its cousin the Black Rat is most famous for bringing the Plague or 'Black Death' to Europe. The disease was carried by fleas, which lived in the rat's fur. The disease spread through Europe in the 1300s and was believed to have killed 30-60% of the population. The Black Rat was very widespread in Europe until it was displaced by the Brown Rat.

