

Are we Poisoning our Wildlife?

This wildlife friendly information is sourced from members of Tweed Valley Wildlife Carers, members of other groups, independent advice, and research. We hope you find the information below useful, and it helps to answer your questions on this subject. If you have any further questions, please feel free to contact us by clicking this link: <http://www.tvwc.org.au/contact.php>

Rats and mice are not usually welcome house guests, especially as they will eat practically anything, spread disease and other pests such as fleas, and can cause damage to property. However, in trying to rid your property of these vermin, you may also be harming, even killing, native animals, directly or indirectly.

Tweed Valley Wildlife Carers are often called to rescue animals and birds that have no obvious signs of injury, other than being weak, or are convulsing. Often the wildlife is found on the ground, in a backyard or away from a road, so we can discount it having been hit by a car. The tell-tale signs of a cat or dog attack are missing too.

Often, in these cases, the cause is poisoning from rodent or cockroach bait poison.

Primary and Secondary Poisoning

Primary poisoning is when the animal eats the bait directly. This occurs most often with possums, perhaps where a householder has put rat baits up in their roof, also frequented by the local possum.

This occurred recently, where local Uki residents saw a Mountain Brushtail Possum eat the Ratsak they had put out to kill rats. Fortunately, they called TVWC's 24 hour wildlife hotline immediately and the female possum was caught, taken into care and put on Vitamin K medication for 28 days. We waited nervously for signs of illness as there was no guarantee that she would survive. But she did, and has since she been returned to her home range.

How many others out there are not so lucky? Even when such poisons are concealed, there is no guarantee that lizards and bandicoots and other animals are not finding and eating it.

Most often, however, our wildlife is subjected to secondary poisoning, when they unwittingly eat a mouse, rat or cockroach that has been eating the poison. Such poison-affected prey is probably easier to catch, thereby increasing the risk to our animals.

What do Rat Poisons do?

All rat poisons are dangerous but some are worse than others. There are two basic types of rodent poisons – multi-feed and single-feed – but most are based on anticoagulants. Anticoagulant baits interfere with the blood-clotting mechanisms of the animal so that, once the poison has built to a certain level, the animal dies of internal bleeding.

Single-dose poisons, eg the product Talon, although requiring just a single feed to kill the animal, will not kill it for several days. During this time, the rat will return to feed on the poison and, as a result of continued feeding, will have high levels of toxins in its body. These poisons are a high risk to wildlife, and to pets, easily killing an owl that eats the mouse or rat.

The most commonly-used multi-dose rat poisons are Ratsak and Racumin, less potent than the single-dose poisons, as they are not as persistent in the body, but nevertheless a danger to our wildlife. Ratsak contains the anticoagulant Warfarin. Racumin, on the other hand, is a Coumatetralyl-based poison. Studies have found that wildlife and pets are at lower risk from Racumin poisoning than from Ratsak but both are inhumane ways of killing animals. It will take up to ten days for the poison to take effect, with the animals dying slowly and agonizingly, bleeding to death.



This Mountain Brushtail Possum was lucky – it was seen eating Ratsak and was taken into care by TVWC members immediately, put on medication and recovered.

Because of the delay, there is increased risk of other animals preying upon the affected rodent, and experiencing the same horrible fate.

It is not a humane death, even for rats!

No poison is good for wildlife

No matter which poison we use to rid our houses of rodents or cockroaches, magnificent animals such as owls and other raptors, tawny frogmouths, kookaburras, goannas and quolls are put at risk, not to mention your family pets.

Instead of using poisons, keep rodent numbers down by eliminating the problem in the first place. It is a three-pronged attack: remove rodent food sources, remove their habitat, and encourage natural predators. Some practical tips:

- Do not leave food, eg bird seed or dog and cat food, out.
- Keep all food and scraps in tight containers.
- Pick up fallen fruit.
- Do not have open compost bins, but make sure the bins are buried deeply so the rodents can't tunnel under.
- Tidy up, removing debris, stored junk, long grass, etc.
- Seal up gaps around the outside of your house.
- Encourage a resident carpet python or two.
- Put up a nest box to encourage a family of owls to make your property home.
- Where there is a rodent problem, use well-placed, humane traps such as Elliot traps. However, you must also be patient; although mice are curious, rats are cautious and need to get used to something before they investigate.



Instead of poisoning magnificent birds such as this Barn Owl when they eat Ratsak-infected mice, put up a nest box to encourage them to take up residence at your place, and keep the mice down naturally.