

## Rat (Domestic)

(*Rattus norvegicus*)

**Habitat and Distribution:** The domestic rat is a descendent of the brown rat and is thought to have originated from Asia, moving into Europe in 1553 and then onto the U.S. in 1775.

**Size:** Males are 8-10 inches long; females 6-7 inches long. They weigh 7-16 ounces.

**Diet:** Rats will eat just about anything – meat, fruits, and vegetables.

**Predators:** Rats are preyed upon by many predators, including mammals, birds and reptiles.

**Life Span:** 2-4 years (captive life span)

**Reproduction:** Domestic rats are sexually mature at 6-8 weeks of age. They breed year round. The gestation period lasts between 21-30 days and the litter size is from 2-24 (average 8-12) young. The young are weaned between 3-5 weeks.

**Behavior:** In captivity the rat is a sociable pet. They are nocturnal and very intelligent. Rats living together develop an order of hierarchy with certain rats being dominant over others. In the wild the brown rat, or Norway rat, lives in groups, developing strong relationships with others in the group. The group may consist of fifty to sixty rats that are often closely related. This rat pack is essential to the rat's survival. The rat pack is one reason why poisons don't work well on a group of rats. Often one rat of the group will be the designated as a taste-tester. If, after tasting, the rat doesn't get sick, the rest of the pack feels free to eat the new item. Rats are highly intelligent and able to learn from their own mistakes and the observed experiences of other rats. Although they prefer not to go into the water, they are excellent swimmers and can hold their breath for two to three minutes if necessary.

**Conservation Connection:** Secure. There has been a lot of prejudice against the rat due to the spread of plague, but it was the black rat that played a part in this epidemic and it was not the rat itself that carried the plague but the fleas that it carried.

**Interesting Facts:** Rats are part of the rodent family and have large incisor teeth that are continually growing. Gnawing is an important activity to prevent the teeth from overgrowing.

