

Wild Things: Mice

BY MARGARET BAIRD

Surely the irony isn't lost on us. Shelters often devote attention and space to housing pet mice in need of forever homes. But all too often a darker scenario is simultaneously playing out behind the scenes—this one starring little wild mice.

Although it hardly seems fair to be caring for one type of mouse while cursing the presence of another, hygiene must be a top priority in shelters. House mice can carry diseases, so you must do your best to keep rodents from roaming the halls. Unfortunately, continuously trapping and killing these animals is often the strategy of choice—and that won't solve your problem over the long term. As with most wild-life conflicts, the keys to resolving mouse problems are rooted in prevention: Be observant, proactive, and remove or control what attracts them in the first place.

Humankind's relationship with mice goes way back. Ever since cavemen began growing crops some 10,000 years ago, mice have been homing in on our homes—and caves—and nibbling on our hard-won harvests. In fact, mice are known as *commensal* rodents, a Latin word meaning "sharing the table." As their name suggests, house mice (*Mus musculus*) have learned to cozy up to people by invading our tables, shelves, countertops, that warm space behind the fridge ... you name it. Grayish-brown—some would even describe their color as mousy—with long, naked tails, these ubiquitous rodents can be found wherever humans have seen fit to raise a roof.

But they're shy creatures; many people don't even realize when they have mice quietly living in their midst. Mice do leave calling cards, however, in the form of gnawed packaging and foods (especially seeds and grain products); chewed-up wood, books, and the like; and of course their signature quarter-inch rod-shaped droppings. Cozy nests made of shredded paper and other soft materials can often be found tucked



away in drawers, cabinets, or other little-disturbed places.

House mice are year-round breeders, capable of producing as many as eight litters per year containing four to seven youngsters each. That's a whole lot o' mice potentially scurrying around the establishment. Adding to the mix, if your shelter is near woods or meadows, you might also sometimes see country cousins like white-footed or deer mice indoors, particularly in the fall as they seek out warmer places.

Mice stick around because they are attracted by a convenient, steady food source. Keep your kibble rodent-proofed, and the battle is mostly won. Store all feedstuffs in metal or sturdy plastic containers with securely fitting lids, ideally in a closed room. Be extra vigilant about sweeping up spilled feed, and pick up bowls of uneaten feed promptly. Sanitation is of the utmost importance, as mice can thrive on mere scraps—a few scattered dog kibbles can make for a mousy feast. Next, prevent access by repairing or sealing up all potential entry

holes. This can take some real detective work, since mice can squeeze through spaces the size of a dime. Look for cracks in foundations, and small holes and gaps around windows, doors, and pipes, and behind appliances.

Keep at it—with dedicated preventative efforts in place, lethal control of mice is almost never necessary and just leads to a cycle of killing as populations continually rebound. As guardians and protectors of animals, we have a duty to treat them all humanely—even the smallest house mouse.

A final word on glue board traps: These abhorrent devices are responsible for more suffering than virtually any other wildlife control product on the market. They're cheap but indiscriminate, and animals caught on them suffer slow and agonizing deaths. Don't use them.

For more information on mice, visit humanesociety.org/wildneighbors. **AS**

Margaret Baird is co-author of Wild Neighbors: The Humane Approach to Living with Wildlife.