


# Cheap Ways to Handle Your Pest Problem, and Prevent Them From Coming Back

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In the quiet and calm of night, I started hearing random thuds which I thought were outside my bedroom window.

I ignored them.

Then the thuds moved to the area in the ceiling above my head and scurrying sounds followed the thuds.

It sounded like a dance party with tiny pitter-pattering feet and it meant the rodents in the attic were back.

I knew the sounds. I have had rats in the attic before. I thought they were gone, but they came back.

If you think you have rodents in your attic, there are four things you need to do: Investigate, exterminate, eliminate entry points and decontaminate.

Here are several cheap or low cost ways to rid your attic of rodents.

## **Got a Pest Problem? First, Investigate.**

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No matter where you live, rodents can get into your attic space. It isn't a sign of dirt or hygiene, they're just looking for somewhere warm and cozy and an attic is both.

“We joke about it, it's like a motorcycle rider. There are those who have already been down and those who are going to go down. We transferred that over to rats. There are those who have had rats in the past, currently have them, or will have them,” said Patrick Hutchison co-

owner of Ratman, a pest and wildlife control company in the Tampa, Florida area. “It’s kind of the nature of the beast around here.”

You might hear thumping, scurrying, scampering, gnawing or squeaking sounds. Your pets might notice rodents before you do, so you might want to investigate if your pet seems to be reacting to something in the walls or ceiling.

The attic animals can vary in different parts of the country, but in most areas squirrels and rats are the biggest culprits. Bats, raccoons, opossums and snakes can also find their way into attics.

Squirrels come and go to get food and are most active in the early morning and evening. Rats are nocturnal and shy, so you’ll mostly hear them during the night.

There are two main kinds of rats — the Norway and the black rat.

- **Norway rat:** Also known as a barn rat, brown rat, common rat, gray rat, house rat, sewer rat, water rat and more. They’re in most of the United States. They prefer lower levels, so they might not be the ones in your attic.
- **Black rat:** Also known as a roof rat, tree rat or fruit rat. They’re common along the Gulf Coast and mostly live in trees and like dead palm fronds and branches. They don’t like the cold and often get into attics or roofs.

All rodents can damage insulation and air ducts, chew through wires or drywall, damage property you have stored in the attic and spread diseases through their droppings.

No matter how much you want them to, attic rodents won’t go away on their own so you’ll need to take some action.

First, you’ll need to take a look to see what kind of critter you’re dealing with. Be careful. Attic footing can be treacherous, so make sure you’re paying attention to where you step.

Here’s what to look for:

- **Droppings:** Rat droppings are cylindrical, shiny black when fresh, and about half or  $\frac{3}{4}$  of an inch long. Squirrel poop looks similar but it is often larger and is more pellet shaped.
- **Disruption of nesting materials:** Look for tunnels and nesting areas. You might see scraps of fur or hair.
- **Smell of urine:** If the smell is really strong, it’s likely the rodents have been up there a while.
- **Damage:** Look for any holes in air ducts or damaged wires or chew marks on anything.

“If you see droppings, they’re not just going to just appear. Some people are naïve and say they don’t have a problem because they only saw one or two,” Hutchison said. “There may be more you don’t see. That one or two lets you know you had a rodent in your attic at some point and how they got in, you don’t know. You need to start being proactive.”

## Time to Exterminate

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Extermination is the next step.

“While they’re up there, they’re not just hanging out. They’re chewing on things and making a litterbox out of your attic. All that stuff just leads to more extensive problems down the line,” Hutchison said.

The easiest way to get rid of rodents in the attic is to hire a wildlife removal company or a pest control company that handles rodents.

According to HomeGuide, removing wildlife can begin at about \$150 and can cost as much as \$1,000 or more. The cost depends on the type of rodent, how bad the infestation is, how many entry points are open, the degree of damage, and more. Many companies price different services separately and you can decide what you need.

You can also tackle the problem yourself, if you know you’re dealing with small rodents and there is no sign of attic damage.

“Treating for rats and squirrels are completely different. Squirrels will not necessarily live in your attic. Rats will. You need to extract them in a different way,” Hutchison explained.

Remember, there usually isn’t just one rat in the attic. You’re probably dealing with at least half a dozen. They reproduce quickly.

“Rats will follow each other’s pheromones so if you’ve got one or two rats coming and going, those one or two rats can multiply into four, five, or six and then before you know it, they’ve had a litter and now you’ve got a family of rats. It can go from zero to a big problem in a short amount of time,” Hutchison warned.

Trapping is one part of the extermination process. It solves the immediate issue, but does not prevent further infestation.

There are three kinds of traps for rats:

- **Live:** Live traps are like a small cage that keeps the animal alive. Experts say this might seem more humane than killing, but dealing with and relocating live animals can cause issues since you might be separating babies from moms or dealing with agitated animals.

- **Glue:** Glue traps are a flat surface with a sticky adhesive. Large rats can often pull themselves free and the stuck ones do not die instantly.
- **Snap:** Snap traps use bait to attract the rodent and then a spring-loaded bar comes down on the rodent's head, killing it instantly.

You'll need to set more than one trap at a time and try to put them where you know the rats have been. Look for rub marks and places where they have urinated or defecated. Rats often stick to runways which can be along a wall or wood near the edge of the attic. They also like to run along wires.

Rats are fairly smart and are often suspicious about new things, so they can sometimes take your bait without setting off the trap.

For bait, you could try:

- Specific rat bait available in home improvement stores
- Peanut butter and nuts
- Bacon
- Dried fruits of all kinds
- Hot dogs or sausages
- Gumdrops, chocolates, or similar candies

Some rats are picky eaters and might not take your bait or they might be satisfied with the food they're already getting and don't need your bait.

A basic rat snap trap starts at about \$3 and can go up to about \$8. Glue traps start at about \$5. Live traps are more expensive. Some emit electronic signals and others are simply enclosures.

It might be tempting to forego the traps and bait and instead poison the critters. Extermination experts say using poison inside the attic is a very bad idea.

"They're going to eat the poison in your attic and then chances are they will be dying in your attic and then you're going to have to deal with another slew of issues like a bad smell, house flies, and things that come about with decaying matter," Hutchison said. "That's something else you have to deal with all together."

Also, if you choose to use poisons, make sure the poison won't harm or kill any wildlife that might eat a rat.

Before you begin trapping, make sure you have a plan to dispose of the animals you catch.

## Eliminate the Entry Points

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In addition to trapping the culprits, it's important to keep them from getting in again.

“Once you're not catching anything, at that point you can go ahead and seal everything up,” Hutchison said. “But still do trapping because there is a chance there still could be something up there.”

Many of the possible entry points are either on your roof or in other high places, so be very careful when on a ladder and do not do this task alone without someone to spot you on the ladder.

Rats can squeeze through any hole about the size of a nickel, so they don't need much of an opening to find their way into your attic.

Look for any openings like roof vents, soffits, eave gaps, and any openings where things go into the walls, like HVAC connections.

“Basically any area that leads into your attic or into your home, you'll want to seal it, even if you think nothing could get through it,” Hutchison said, adding even the holes where wires for security cameras run can be entry points for rodents.

Seal any cracks and cover any vents or openings with secure metal mesh, aluminum flashing, or something permanent.

“Some people want to use expanding spray foam to secure holes and it is a good deterrent, but not a permanent seal,” Hutchison said. “Rats and squirrels can chew through that.”

If you're dealing with squirrels in your attic, installing an excluder door can let them get out of your attic but won't let them back in.

Once you're sure they're gone, you can remove the door and seal the entry with wire mesh.

Also, trim back any trees that are close to the roof, rafters, or gutters and clean up any debris that might be around your house.

This step is where I made my mistake. When I got a new HVAC system, I forgot to have my pest control company come and check to make sure nothing was left unsealed. A recent house painting job might also have dislodged some of the seals the previous pest companies had put in.

After a period of silence, the rats had found their way in again.

## **They're Gone. Now What? Decontaminate.**

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Once the pests are gone, you'll need to remove what they left behind and disinfect and sanitize by removing droppings and any debris you see.

Rodent urine and feces can carry diseases, so be careful handling materials or breathing in the areas where they were.

"We encourage our customers to do a bleach water spray or a heavy-duty cleaner to clean up and disinfect," Hutchison says, adding sometimes an attic remediation is necessary if too many rodents were there for too long. "Rats can carry up to 32 airborne diseases, so we encourage anyone who has had an infestation in their attic to have adequate remediation and get it cleaned up so you're not living with a litterbox above your head."

Because I was not comfortable doing any of the rat removal myself, I chose to hire a wildlife removal company to take care of my situation.

The entire process to rid my home of attic rats took about three weeks and involved several trapping visits, bait stations outside my house, and sealing several openings. I also have a warranty for the work.

Now I'm catching up on sleep. I didn't sleep too well during the entire critter removal process because once I heard anything, I couldn't fall back to sleep.

I was convinced the critters would come through an HVAC vent and land in the bed next to me.

But they most likely won't.

"Anything is possible that they can get into the home from the attic," Hutchison says, with a laugh, but adds it doesn't happen often.

I'm happy they're gone.

*Tiffani Sherman is a Florida-based freelance reporter with more than 25 years of experience writing about finance, health, travel and other topics.*