



Critters in our Midst: Key Largo Woodrat

by Carol Ellis

Calusa Indians, Spaniards, wreckers, pirates, farmers, Bahamian fisherman, Conchs, homesteaders, hermits, land developers, the U.S. Government, collectors and conservationists have all laid claim to the Upper Keys. Each in

their own way have left their mark.

US1, the main route to the Florida Keys, contained the tourism and development for those seeking an exotic world of tropical adventure, and spared North Key Largo

from much attention.

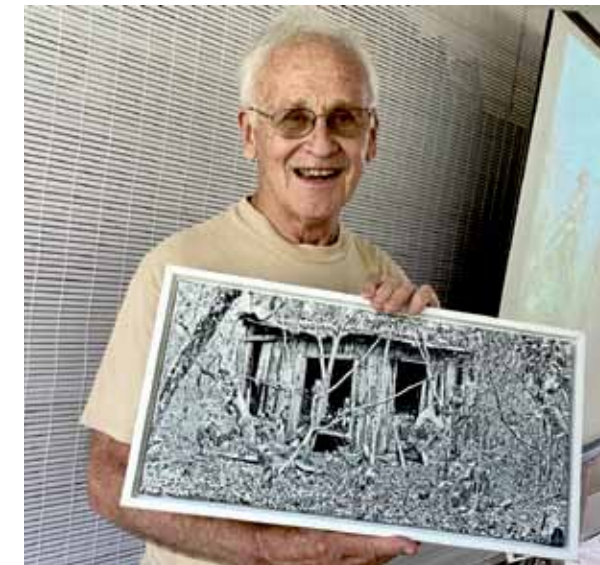
I arrived in the Florida Keys in 1984 in my red Pinto station wagon containing all my belongings, including a windsurfer strapped to the roof. I took a left at the intersection of US1 and CR

"Collapsed Conch Cottage in 2022" Carol Ellis Photo. With Ralph's help, it became a productive nesting site containing multiple woodrat nests.

and the acquisition of Port Bougainville by the State of Florida in 1982 were pivotal events securing the future of a natural N. Key Largo. The CLNWR is home to the endangered Key Largo woodrat, Key Largo cotton mouse, Stock Island tree snail, Schaus' swallowtail butterfly and American Crocodile.

There are many misconceptions about one of the protected species: the Key Largo woodrat. Very dissimilar from the black rat, the Key Largo woodrat is a nocturnal animal, that lives away from humans in the hammocks of North Key Largo. The woodrat is greyish

Key Largo Woodrat CONTINUED



"Conch Cottage in 2008 | Ralph DeGayner" Carol Ellis Photo. A two-room cottage belonging to an early settler prior to its collapse in 2011.

Some people see black rats like the ones attacking a bird feeder, and claim they are woodrats. A woman seated at the local bar was overheard saying: "I don't understand why the government is building houses for those rats in N. Key Largo". Her vision of woodrats occupying a three room dollhouse, complete with front porch, and a tin roof, is totally false.

Yes folks, they walk among us.

Prior to the 1980s, on both sides of CR-905 there were wheel-worn finger roads, about six ft. wide and as high as a pick-up truck, etched in the coral rock. These roads of formerly platted subdivisions became the dumping grounds for old refrigerators, discarded vehicles and construction debris. With public acquisition came cleaning up of the trash, some of which included piles of sticks indicative of nesting Key Largo woodrats.

Ralph and Clay DeGayner signed on to volunteer at the refuge because they wanted to see a woodrat. They became curious as to why the woodrats were not piling sticks, but instead making homes in the hollowed out bases of trees and under debris.

It became obvious that supplemental nests were needed. Ralph's idea of using discarded jet skis as nests was frowned upon by researchers, however he persisted, and jet skis were hauled into the woods, and covered with natural materials such as coral rock and tree debris. When they began working as nesting sites, Ralph says "some of my

best breeders," it changed everyone's minds.

Rodents are at the bottom of the food chain and their natural predators include snakes and raptors, along with non-native predators such as feral cats, and Burmese Python. Cameras were placed in the nests, which provided researchers with valuable information pertaining to reproduction, and what predators were in the vicinity, and eventually implicated feral cats as a major predator, attracted by the commotion the woodrats made while building their stick nests.



"Jet Ski Supplemental Nest" - Carol Ellis Photo. Supplemental nests constructed with a jet ski covered by natural materials such as coral rock and tree debris. |

Ralph, born during the Great Depression, dedicated two decades of his life toward improving a habitat, that during his lifetime was nearly destroyed, so that a future generation could see a woodrat. Ralph's most memorable moment as a volunteer, came while spending time with conservation icon Jane Goodall, visiting thriving woodrat nests in the hammocks. After the visit, Goodall wrote: "a small group of dedicated persons, even volunteers with little scientific training, can help turn around an extinction event just by persisting in intelligent efforts."

Personally, I am not particularly bothered if I see an actual woodrat in my lifetime; I am just reassured by the passionate efforts of many to ensure their survival.

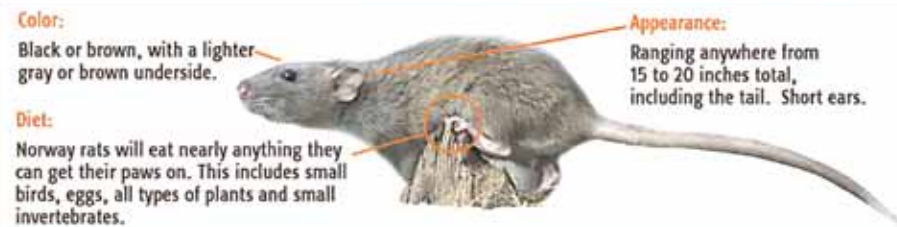
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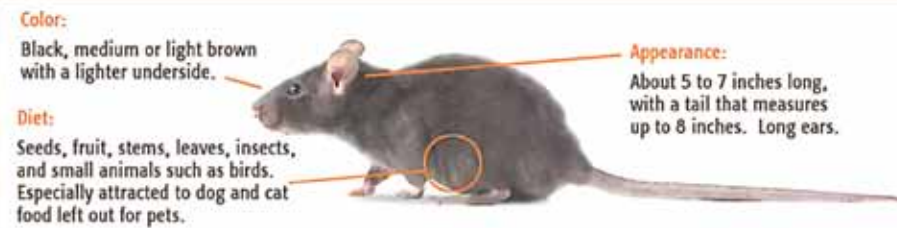


RATS OF NORTH AMERICA

NORWAY RAT (aka Brown Rat)



ROOF RAT (aka Ship Rat, Brown Rat)



WOODRAT (aka Pack Rat)



MARSH RICE RAT



"Key Largo Woodrat" - Clay DeGayner Photo. The woodrat is greyish brown, with a hairy tail and big ears; it resembles a mouse.

905 and headed northeast, eventually ending up in a small conch cottage in Gulfstream Shores named "Somewhere Else." It was in the middle of future conservation lands.

The establishment of Crocodile Lake NWR in 1980,

brown, with a hairy tail, big ears and resembles a mouse. The black rat, a nuisance species, has a long scaly tail and is found in populated areas, around dumpsters, or even in your tool shed or attic.



"Bug in the Woods" - Carol Ellis Photo. Roads of formerly platted subdivisions along CR-905, became the dumping grounds for old, discarded vehicles.