

Giant rat poses threat to Florida Everglades



I can understand a kid asking for a giant rat as a pet. What I can't understand is any parent that says "OK". The Gambian pouched rat (*Cricetomys gambianus*) is a size most people would associate with a cat, not a rat. It's a rat that can be a metre long.

This large African rodent ("pouched" as in cheek pouches for hoarding all that rat food) has cost the taxpayers of the United States a fair few dollars to satisfy the "needs" of a few rat lovers that want to get one up on the Joneses. In 2003, a recently imported giant rat carried monkeypox into the USA, infecting prairie dogs, who went on to infect their new owners. Dozens of cases in the US midwest were traced to prairie dogs from Phil's Pocket Pets in Illinois. Monkeypox is a pretty serious disease, akin to mild smallpox, so naturally the US Centers for Disease Control (CDC) took the outbreak pretty seriously. The disease has about a 10% mortality rate in Africa.

The rats were banned from import and as a pet following the monkeypox incident. What do you do if you are a pet trader with a stock of giant pouched rats but no market? Well, it seems at least one let them go. So Grassy Key in Florida now has a breeding population of these whooping rodents. Nate Snow, a researcher with the USDA spoke on their efforts to rid Grassy key of these rats at the [Vetebrate Pest Conference](#) in Sacramento last week.

Nate told us that USDA consulted widely with the local residents prior to the eradication effort. They would have been interesting conversations: "Good Morning Ma'am, we are from the government and

we believe there may be yard-long rats under your house. Would you like us to get rid of them?" Not surprisingly, most householders jumped at the chance to have their rat infestation fixed - but not everyone. The rats found refuge with at least one householder, so the eradication effort was not fully successful. Florida still has a giant rat problem. If the rats make it to the Everglades, they'll probably be no stopping them - unless the thousands of invasive Burmese pythons, also there thanks to the pet trade, take care of them.

The ban on Gambian pouched rats as pets has now been lifted. The ban on importing them to the United States remains in place.

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