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Scobie Pye, Rat Scientist

Scobie Pye has been trapping feral animals on subantarctic islands for nearly thirty years and knows a great deal about the rats of Macquarie Island.

The science of rats

Veteran Rat Catcher, Terrence or 'Scobie' Pye first went to the subantarctic in 1972 as a carpenter. He is now completing a Master of Science thesis on the rats of Macquarie Island at the University of Tasmania.

Rats were not a problem to humans on Macquarie Island until the early part of the twentieth century. By 1911, however, they were making life uncomfortable for sealers and scientists alike.



Terrence Pye, photo courtesy Zoology Department, University of Tasmania.

Rats nearly destroyed Harold Hamilton's collection of biological specimens in 1913. By then, these rodents could be found in large numbers around sealing sites, eating food that was stored in huts and keeping people awake at night.

It is not known how rats first arrived on Macquarie Island, but it is probable that they floated ashore on wreckage from shipwrecks.



A Macquarie Island rat. Photo Terrence Pye.

Scientists are keen to eliminate rats from Macquarie Island because they present a danger to the island's native wildlife. Rats can interfere with the breeding of albatrosses and other ground

nesting birds, either by eating their eggs and chicks, or by disturbing the parents so that they do not return to their nests.

Macquarie Island's rats are probably not as well fed today as their ancestors, who would have feasted on the plentiful remains of seal and penguin carcasses in the days of the oiling industry.

Today's rats burrow and nest in the soft, peaty base of tussock grass on the beaches. These homes are ideal because they are well drained and provide shelter from the weather.

The rats on Macquarie Island used to be preyed upon by feral cats, but these their main predator is the human rat hunter. Most of the rats that Scobie has caught have been put to death painlessly with ether in a laboratory at the ANARE station on Macquarie Island. His biggest haul has been 407 in a three year study season. These rats were caught by using butter to lure them into cage traps.

Scobie Pye is a scientist, not just a rat killer, and he is interested in studying the habits and reproductive behaviours of these intelligent and intriguing animals. Part of his research has involved a radio tracking project between December 1997 and May 1998. He and his colleagues trapped a number of rats and recorded details such as their gender and sexual maturity. They then anaesthetized the rats and placed radio collars around their necks.



A rat with a radio collar. Photo Terrence Pye.

Several hours later the rats were taken back to the place where they had been caught and released. Radio signals from their collars were then monitored at regular intervals. These signals gave valuable information about the rats' movements and the location of their burrows.

This information will be useful in eliminating all rats from Macquarie Island, so that the native species can be better protected.

References

Pye, T., 1999, 'Ecology and Reproductive Biology of the Feral Black Rat (*rattus rattus*) on Subantarctic Macquarie Island', Master of Science thesis, University of Tasmania..

Interview with Terrence Pye, September 1999.

Further Reading

Rats also feature in:

'Graveyard Reefs and Tombstone Rocks'

Blake, Hamilton and Mac