

THE MOUSE THAT JUST WOULDN'T QUIT

Martin Foster 66,
retired computer engineer

Last winter, Martin Foster found mouse droppings on his kitchen worktop. Preferring not to kill the mouse, Martin purchased a humane trap and was fortunate to catch the furry pest at the first attempt. He then set the mouse free in a nearby field.

To his dismay, Martin found yet more mouse droppings the following night. Once again, he set and baited the humane trap and, lo and behold, caught another mouse.

Martin said: 'This went on for three weeks until I began to think that perhaps it was the same mouse coming back each night.'

Eventually Martin's partner, José, bought some traditional poison, but Martin refused to use it and placed the poison safely away in a cupboard.

A couple of days later, he noticed that something had gnawed at the packet of poison stored in the cupboard. 'I haven't seen the poor little fellow since,' Martin told us. 'A case of curiosity killed the mouse!'

**Martin's
unwelcome
visitor in
happier times**

Today the figure is around 60 per cent.' This has meant that people are using less effective DIY solutions, rather than opting for costlier professional help.

The 1949 Prevention of Damage by Pests Act requires local authorities (excluding Northern Ireland) to keep their district free from rodents, although they are not obliged to foot the bill. We randomly selected 20 local authorities across the UK and found that costs vary from council to council, and so do the services on offer.

Fourteen of the councils we looked at offered a free service for rats, 11 for mice, seven for cockroaches and bedbugs, four for fleas and only one offered a free service for wasps. Our snapshot indicates that a postcode lottery is going on up and down the country. Those of you fortunate enough to live in North Lanarkshire in Scotland receive a free service to get rid of all common pests. Similarly, in Swansea, you will get a free service for rats, mice, cockroaches and bedbugs. Residents of Enfield in north London, on the other hand, have to fork out £68 a pop for the same services. And spare a thought for those folk living in Armagh City and District Council in Northern Ireland and Westminster Council in London – they don't offer any services at all, so you are instructed to call in a private pest controller.

**Bedbugs can get into your home
via luggage or second-hand books**

Mice, rats, bedbugs and other pests are on the rise. We investigate why and tell you how to keep your home pest free

Under control

It's late at night and you're trying to get some sleep but an irritating scratching noise is keeping you awake. Out of the shadows a tiny ball of fur flashes past. You turn on the lights and your worst fear is confirmed – there, peering back at you from the corner of the room, is a wee tim'rous beastie.

Pest infestation can be a serious problem, causing damage to your property and even your health: creatures such as rats, mice and cockroaches can spread diseases, including salmonella and listeria. If you find an unwelcome visitor it's important you act fast to get rid of it. The longer you leave it, the greater and more costly your problem becomes – a pair of rats can start a colony that can produce up to 800 babies a year.

Our investigation into pest control will provide you with advice on the best way to get rid of common pests, such as rats, mice, bedbugs, fleas, wasps and cockroaches, and give you tips on how to keep the blighters out of your home in the first place.

POSTCODE LOTTERY

The National Pest Technicians Association (NPTA) says that brown rats and house mice increased by 39 and 12.5 per cent respectively between 1999 and 2005. According to the NPTA's CEO, Jon Davison, one of the key reasons for the increase in rodents is that many local authorities have started charging for rodent control services: 'When we started our rodent survey in 1998, just 10 per cent of councils charged.

Truth about bats

Bats are a natural pest controller, eating up to 3,000 bugs a day



You are most likely to find bats roosting in your roof in late spring, when they emerge from hibernation. Some species prefer a larger loft space, but don't worry – they are unlikely to find your nice new loft conversion particularly attractive, as they prefer dark spaces. Jamie Eastham from the Bat Conservation Trust told us: 'If you find them in your living room, it usually means they're lost.'

Bats are a protected species in the UK and it is illegal to kill, injure or take one. It's also illegal to disturb them, so if you find one in your loft be

very considerate and don't shine your torch at it. Bats don't cause damage to your property and, unlike rats, have only one baby a year so you needn't worry about being overrun.

If you do find bats in your home, call the Bat Conservation Trust (see 'Contacts') for tips on what to do. You may be able to get them removed if you have a severe phobia. Contact Natural England, the Countryside Council for Wales, Scottish Natural Heritage Environment or Heritage Service Northern Ireland for advice.

WHO YOU GONNA CALL?

If you have pests in your home, it's best to call a professional to deal with a serious infestation or if you don't want to get rid of them yourself. Your first point of call should be the pest control unit of your local council. Chartered Institute of Environmental Health spokesman James Davis told us: 'Local authority charges are, on the whole, less than those charged by private contractors.'

Should your local authority not offer a suitable service, call one of the many private companies available. Most of you will have heard of national chains such as Rentokil, but there are also hundreds of small private pest control services operating in the UK. To find a good one in your area, your best bet is to ask for a recommendation from family or friends.

For added peace of mind, select a company that is a member of either the NPTA or the British Pest Control Association (BPCA). NPTA and BPCA members will meet a set criteria of experience and competency and have liability insurance. They are also qualified to use pest control substances stronger than those approved for DIY. Contact either organisation (see 'Contacts', opposite) for a list of qualified pest controllers in your area, then call a couple of firms to get a competitive quote.

PEST PREVENTION

The best way to ensure that you do not have to call in a pest controller is to prevent the creatures from infesting your home in the first place. There are several simple measures you can take.

Rats and mice

Rats can squeeze through a hole the size of a thumb and mice a gap the size of a pen, so block all possible entry points to your home. Fill in holes in walls and gaps around pipes, use thin wire mesh to cover ventilation holes and place wire balloons (less than £2 from builders' merchants) in the tops of drain pipes. Even fixing a bristle strip to the bottom of a door can act as a barrier.

Ensure rubbish is disposed of properly and clear up spillages. Don't leave food lying around either inside or outside your home. Clear up fallen fruit from trees and leftover bird food in your garden.

If you regularly find litter around your home from local shops, call your local council as it can force them to clear it up.

Cockroaches

Cockroaches like dark humid conditions and thrive around boilers and ovens – ensure all cracks are repaired. Don't place boxes around protruding pipes: it may look good but it also provides a great hiding place.

PEST: RAT

NAME Brown or Norwegian rat (*Rattus norvegicus*) and the less common black rat (*Rattus rattus*)

SIZE 20 to 27cm long (excluding tail)

COLOUR Brown or black fur

FAVOURITE FOOD: Rats like cereals but are happy to gorge on anything, including each other and faeces

WHAT TO LOOK FOR Rat droppings (typically 12mm long), signs of chewing, foot prints and tail marks, and greasy smear marks along walls and floors

WHY SHOULD I DEAL WITH IT? Rats spread diseases harmful to humans, including salmonella and Weil's disease. They contaminate food intended for human consumption and cause damage to buildings

CAN I DEAL WITH THEM MYSELF?

Rats aren't inquisitive and trapping requires expertise. Poisons are available but some rats are becoming immune to weaker DIY products, so seek professional help

HOW MUCH WILL IT COST? Local authority (excluding free service) £10 to £68; private firms £41 to £229



PEST: MOUSE

NAME House mouse (*Mus domesticus*)

SIZE 7 to 9cm long (excluding tail)

COLOUR Grey/brown

FAVOURITE FOOD Cereals, chocolate and biscuits

WHAT TO LOOK FOR Mouse droppings (typically 5mm long), signs of chewing, particularly on food, scratching noises, greasy smears along walls and floors

WHY SHOULD I DEAL WITH IT? Mice spread diseases, including salmonella and listeria. They also contaminate food and cause damage to buildings

CAN I DEAL WITH THEM MYSELF? Yes. Keep traps away from pets and children and place them along a wall on a route used by the mouse. Despite the myth, cheese isn't a good bait – see 'Favourite food'. If you use a humane trap, check it regularly and set the mouse free in a field at least a quarter of a mile from your home, but be aware you may be moving the problem on to someone else. Poisons are available – read instructions carefully to avoid poisoning other wildlife or the environment. Get professional help if you suspect a large number

HOW MUCH WILL IT COST? Local authority (excluding free service) £15 to £68; private firms £41 to £229



PEST: COCKROACH

NAME German cockroach (*Blattella germanica*), oriental cockroach (*Blatta orientalis*)

SIZE German cockroach 12 to 15mm long; oriental cockroach 17 to 30mm long

COLOUR Yellow/brown. Oriental cockroaches are darker

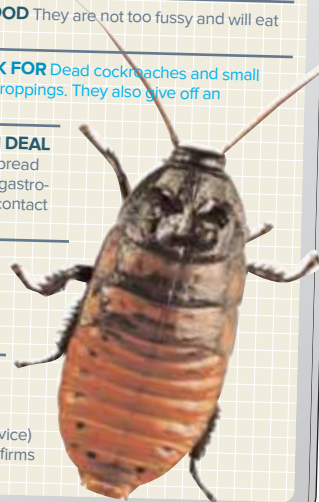
FAVOURITE FOOD They are not too fussy and will eat almost anything

WHAT TO LOOK FOR Dead cockroaches and small spindle-shaped droppings. They also give off an obnoxious smell

WHY SHOULD I DEAL WITH IT? They spread diseases such as gastroenteritis through contact with food

CAN I DEAL WITH THEM MYSELF? It is not advisable. Call a professional

HOW MUCH WILL IT COST? Local authority (excluding free service) £15 to £68; private firms £153 to £223



Good hygiene is the key to keeping cockroaches out of your home. They will eat almost anything they can find, including food, rubbish, paper and even each other.

Fleas

Fleas are usually brought into the home by pets. There are several products available to deter them, including collars, powders and drops. You can pick up a flea collar for as little as £2. If in doubt, ask your vet for advice on the best preventive treatments.

Bedbugs

Bedbugs can get into your home via luggage, clothing or even through second-hand furniture and books – so check them over carefully before you buy. Regularly washing bedding, clothing and curtains, vacuuming and steam cleaning carpets, and removing dust and debris from crevices helps identify and slow down infestation.

Wasps

To discourage wasps, ensure dustbins have tight-fitting lids, cover food, don't let scraps build up around your sink and clear fallen fruit from your garden. Look out for large numbers of wasps buzzing around your roof, as they like to nest in lofts. To wasp-proof your roof, repair broken tiles and use a fine mesh or netting to cover ventilation holes.



Contacts

Bat Conservation Trust
0845 130 0228
www.bats.org.uk

British Pest Control Association
0870 609 2687; www.bpca.org.uk

Chartered Institute of Environmental Health
020 7928 6006; www.cieh.org

Countryside Council for Wales
0845 130 6229
www.ccw.gov.uk

Environment and Heritage Service Northern Ireland
0289 056 9515

www.ehsni.gov.uk

National Pest Technicians Association
0194 981133
www.npta.org.uk

Natural England
0845 600 3078
www.naturalengland.org.uk

Rentokil
0800 917 1989
www.uk.rentokil.com

Scottish Natural Heritage
0146 372 5000
www.snh.org.uk

UNDER SIEGE

Roger Hughes 65, retired teacher, and **Ziggy the cat**

Last December, one of Roger Hughes' two cats dumped a dead rat at his feet. He began hearing scurrying sounds and found droppings in the kitchen. His feline friends were on high alert and in one epic battle Roger told us about, 'the rodent stood on its hind legs and fought back, throwing punches at the cat'. Over time, more droppings appeared and noises began emanating from the oven – which promptly packed up.

An engineer was called in and fixed the cooker, but it broke down again shortly afterwards. The engineer was called again and, on noticing some wires had been chewed, suspected rodents. Roger called Hackney Council, which offers a free service for rats. 'The ratman called and put his baits in place,' said Roger. Two visits later everyone breathed a sigh of relief. 'The cats are still watchful but thankfully we humans haven't seen, heard or smelt any rodents since.'

PEST: FLEA

NAME Cat flea (*Ctenocephalides felis*), dog flea (*Ctenocephalides canis*)

SIZE Around 1 to 4mm long

COLOUR Varies from grey to dark mahogany

FAVOURITE FOOD Blood – mostly from your pet, but stray ones also feed off humans

WHAT TO LOOK FOR Your pet constantly scratching and small black specks found in clusters next to the skin. A dark red spot surrounded by a reddened area if you've been bitten yourself

WHY SHOULD I DEAL WITH IT? Flea bites are a nuisance and can cause serious irritation in some people

CAN I DEAL WITH THEM MYSELF? Vacuum carpets and soft furnishings and tumble-dry infested bedding and clothes for 45 minutes – although if serious you may need to throw them away. Make sure you treat pets on the same day. Call a professional if it's a large-scale problem

HOW MUCH WILL IT COST?

Local authority (excluding free service) £16 to £70; private firms £75 to £188



PEST: BEDBUG

NAME Bedbug (*Cimex lectularius*)

SIZE Around 5mm long

COLOUR Reddish brown/purple after feeding

FAVOURITE FOOD

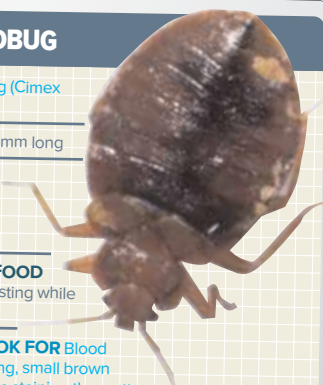
Your blood (feasting while you sleep)

WHAT TO LOOK FOR Blood spots on bedding, small brown excrement spots staining the mattress and bedding, small whitish eggs and, if you have a heavy infestation, a sweet almond smell. You will also notice bites on your skin. Bedbug bites are normally reddish in colour, although they can often develop into a hard whitish swelling

WHY SHOULD I DEAL WITH IT? Bedbugs do not spread diseases but do cause irritation which can result in sleepless nights. Some people can also have severe allergic reactions

CAN I DEAL WITH THEM MYSELF? It is not advisable. Call a professional

HOW MUCH WILL IT COST? Local authority (excluding free service) £16 to £68; private firms £100 to £376



PEST: WASP

NAME Common wasp (*Vespula vulgaris*)

SIZE Around 16mm long

COLOUR Yellow and black body

FAVOURITE FOOD Insects and other household pests, fruit and nectar, dustbin waste and animal carcasses

WHAT TO LOOK FOR Unusually large numbers of wasps around your home

WHY SHOULD I DEAL WITH IT?

Wasps can give a nasty sting. For a minority, this can cause anaphylactic shock – seek urgent medical help if you experience unusual swelling or pain

CAN I DEAL WITH THEM MYSELF? You'll need to wear protective clothing but there are powders and sprays available. If you are allergic to stings, call a professional

HOW MUCH WILL IT COST?

Local authority (excluding free service) £26 to £68; private firms £40 to £71

