



Roaming Rats – Vermin On Board

Vermin such as rats were a great problem on ships. There was a variety of vermin on board ships. Weevils infested the biscuits in huge numbers. Officers were allowed to re-bake their biscuits to remove the weevils, however the crew were not permitted to do this, so they had to eat them as they were, weevils included. Weevils also infested cereals (oatmeal and wheat). Maggots were in many supplies, and also cockroaches, which had a particular liking for ink. Rats however, were a particular problem.

While food was generally kept in wooden barrels, rats were able to gnaw through the wood to reach different decks and the food inside the barrels. They could also bring disease if left unchecked. Rats were a persistent menace to the ship's food supply and were also known to eat sails, clothing and even the hard skin from the soles of sailor's feet while they slept. They could provide meat in desperate times, but caused much damage through the ship.

Many of the general crew on board was employed in catching and killing rats. On HMB *Endeavour*, three cats were also on board for vermin control, and killed rats, mice and cockroaches.

The ship's rat or black rat is *Rattus rattus*, and is also known as the Black, Roof or Old English Rat. Ship rats originated in Asia, where they are still very common. They were also the dominant rats in Europe right up to the late 18th Century, but they are now rare in Europe.

It is this species of rat which is now a threat to many species of birds in Polynesia because it eats eggs and young birds.

The ship's rat is rarely kept as a pet or a laboratory animal. The Norway rat, *Rattus norvegicus* is usually the species of choice for this purpose.