



Ground rat (left) and Climbing rat.

MEET THE CLIMBING RAT

Two types of rats infest cane crops – the ground rat (*Rattus sordidus*) and the climbing rat (*Melomys burtoni*) – causing \$2 to \$9 million damage each year in Queensland.

The heaviest climbing rat infestations are generally found from Tully to Mossman, especially in areas that are heavily dissected by waterways and grassy (harbourage) areas.

Rats damage cane in two ways. First, chewed stalks cause a direct yield loss (reduced tonnes per hectare). Second, rat bites allow bacteria and fungi to enter the stalks, resulting in a 15 to 20 per cent reduction in ccs. Bites can also increase the incidence of attacks by insect pests such as the weevil borer. If you have both destruction of cane and decreased ccs due to rat damage, your losses could be as high as 30 per cent.

Understanding a little about rat biology, including what these species like to eat, where they like to live and when they breed, can help you better control these pests in your canefields.

Diet

- Grasses and weeds, seeds, sugarcane, and berries.
- Little is known about how diet relates to breeding.

Habitat

- The climbing rat is a grassland animal.
- It lives in grasslands, sedge, open forest, or woodland with grassy areas.
- In farming areas it is commonly found in grassy verges of closed forests, unmanaged areas of grass and weeds, and in crops.

Reproduction

- The climbing rat doesn't burrow. Instead it makes round nests of grasses and dead leaves off the ground in grass or sugarcane.
- It is capable of breeding most of the year.
- Its gestation period is unknown.
- Average litter size is two to three offspring.

Damage

- Most climbing rat damage is found in harbourage areas, especially grassy creek banks.
- Damage is nearly always heaviest in the first 10-15 m from the crop edge.
- Climbing rats usually bite stalks at about waist height (and therefore is highly visible.)

