

Rat owners feel strongly about their furry little friends

By **LINDA LOMBARDI**, The Associated Press

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Photo by The Associated Press
 Sarah McCarthy of Lapeer, Mich., holds her pet rats Raisin and Peanut, which she has owned for two years, at her home. "They are cute and friendly, better than fish who do nothing," McCarthy said.

Those beady eyes. The twitchy whiskers. And that long naked tail. To you it says "vermin," maybe, but if you live with a pet rat, that's the look of true love. Rat owners are passionate about their pets. And maybe they have to be, considering how the rest of the world feels about them.

Janet Crystal of Cambridge, Mass., says part of why she loves rats is "because they're the underdog. I'll show someone a picture and they'll say, 'Oh that's cute, is that a hamster?' I tell them it's a rat and then they say 'eww.' The picture didn't change."

Crystal currently has six rats, and has had 23 in the past six years. All of them came from animal shelters, which "often have them in the back because they're very hard to place, because people think they're icky," she says.

But icky is the last word Crystal would use.

"They are, if I only had one word to use, it would be sweet," says Crystal. "They are incredibly affectionate."

Prejudices are hard to overcome – no one expects Disney's new "Ratatouille" to send people rushing to pet stores as if rats were tiny Dalmations – but others second Crystal's opinion. Veterinarian Kimberly Somjen of Ringoes, N.J., started Kim's Ark Rat Rescue while an undergraduate in college.

"More than most other small pets you can have, rats are much like small dogs in the sense that they want to be with their family all the time, and love human contact," she says.

The words "sweet" and "cute" may seem out of place. But domestic rats don't act like street rats – as Crystal says, "It's like comparing a dog to a wolf" – and they don't look like them either. Breeders have come up with many variations: different colors and coat types, and dumbo rats, whose ears are lower on the sides of their heads.

Good breeders select for temperament also, but the personality of the rat is resilient enough to shine through in less fancy specimens, as well. Sarah McCarthy of Davison, Mich., unable to locate a breeder, bought two baby feeder rats at a pet store – saving them from being a meal for a pet snake.



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"When I come home from class they run to the walls of the cage and jump up and hold onto the bars with their little paws and I'll scratch their tummies and ears," McCarthy says.

If you only know rats as pests, you may wonder how anyone ever thought to keep them as pets. But many of their natural qualities made rats suitable for domestication. In fact, you have more in common with rats than you might realize.

Aaron Blaisdell, professor of psychology at UCLA, studies cognition in rats and pigeons.

"Compared to many other rodent species, such as mice and gerbils, rats are highly social creatures," he explains. They're also smarter than you think.

"Experimental investigation of rat cognition has found that they are very trainable and have excellent memory, especially for spatial and odor information," Blaisdell says. "They are also good at timing events, such as learning when a second event will follow a first. In fact, they may even share some striking cognitive abilities with humans – though at a rudimentary level, such as reasoning about cause and effect, and expressing knowledge about what they do and do not know."

Rats also share our ability to be lifelong learners. Their varied diet in the wild means that they can take advantage of many different food sources – and that they enjoy the Froot Loops that Blaisdell uses as a reward in some of his research.

Rats will sample small bits of new food to see if they're safe – unless they can check out what's on a friend's plate. "If they smell a novel food on the breath of another rat, they will immediately incorporate that novel food into their own diet."

Still, brains aren't everything, and rats are clearly loved mainly for their affectionate nature. The only disadvantage mentioned repeatedly was their short lifespan.

"However, you also must understand that despite a lifespan of only two to three years, rats live that time to the fullest," says Somjen. "They offer complete and utter love, are hilariously funny creatures that want nothing more than to be with you."

And while all the owners wished that people understood how wonderful rats are, there's also something special about being the kind of person who likes an animal that no one else does, however you express that feeling.

"It's fun to walk around with them on my shoulders," McCarthy says, "and watch people back away just because they're rats."

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Photo by The Associated Press
Remy, voiced by Patton Oswalt, is the star of "Ratatouille." The movie probably won't have families running for the pet store to get one of these little creatures.

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