

Juba the Dog on Fancy Rats

by Penny Randell

Good day to all you readers. It's Juba here; the dog that pensively chews over life's events and spits them out as a column. This time I want to discuss what is known as a *fancy rat*. These animals (*Rattus norvegicus domestica*) are the domesticated form of *Rattus norvegicus*, or the brown rat. In other words, except for their training, behavior, and being handled in general, the two species are pretty much the same. The name *fancy* derives from the idea and promotion of domesticated animals. It also means to like or appreciate.

Fancy rats date back to 18th century Europe, as they were used for what is known as blood sport. The rats were trapped and placed within a pit. Onlookers would bet on how long it would take a dog to kill them all. This practice was stopped by the beginning of the 20th century and eventually odd-colored rats were treasured enough to be sold as pets. Both sportsmen and rat-catchers were at the forefront of this practice. An English fellow by the name of Jack Black became recognized for his prized selection of fancy rats. He would round up atypically colored critters and decorate them in ribbons and bows.

An actual movement for buying and selling rats was born from the interests of a lady named Mary Douglas. It was 1901 when this lady asked for permission to show her pet rat at the National Mouse Club exhibition in Aylesbury, England. Oh, and by the way, Douglas' black and white hooded rat won "Best in Show," which kicked off the whole faction in a royal way, renaming the group as the National Mouse and Rat Club. After her death in 1921 the fashion began to fade. By 1931 the former addition of "Rat" was removed from the name and the club stood as the original National Mouse Club again. Revived in 1976, the hobby of fancy rats prevails today. There's even an English organization called, National Fancy Rat Society (NFRS). Too much!

Although fancy rats are not recognized as a subspecies, they are set apart from wild rats, especially in color. Wild rats are almost always brown, whereas fancy rats mutated coloring can be white, blonde, and even light blue. And of course, these domesticated little fellers are tamer and can usually be handled on introduction. As for size, these rats are much smaller than a wild rat and their facial features are sharper and more clearly defined. Wild rats have a lifespan of a year or less and our domesticated friend can live up to three years if cared for correctly. Unfortunately, these little guys can catch a pneumococcal infection from humans, so if you are sick, don't handle them.

But why get a rat for a pet anyway? Well, for one thing you can't find a cleaner animal. Fancy rats spend a great deal of their time grooming. Fastidious preeners, if their fur gets dirty they will work until they get themselves completely clean. These rats are extremely intelligent and remain in tune with their master. They even display empathy and are quick to bond with their human caretakers. When caged with other rats, they care for one another. If one rat is ill, the others gather round and offer comfort. These pets learn their name rapidly and recognize faces. They can be taught games and can even learn to put a small ball through a hoop.

In general, rats are highly social animals and do best when they have a cage mate. This can be very entertaining, for they play together, sleep close together, and even share food. If you do have more than one rat, they should probably be from the same litter. Because of their tendency to be territorial. If not litter mates they should be introduced to one another away from their cage and in a neutral area. Male rats may fight at first, but when dominance is eventually established, fighting will cease. The most natural setting for these animals is a pack of three or more. In the wild they live in packs and defend one another.

From this account it should remain obvious that I, Juba the dog, know rats and their behavior. And, indeed I do. My master owned a rat for two years before she passed. I was introduced to this darling and amazing little girl when she came to live with us. It was imperative that I bond with her because she was quite the lovely. We would even sleep together while I remained cautious of her tiny body and didn't roll over on her. Our play time was special and I always enjoyed assisting in cleaning her tiny body. Yes, fancy rats make a great pet...not like a dog, of course, but a fine addition to any home nonetheless.