

'Neotoma houdini' is a sly rat

by Bert Edises

Some time ago I wrote an article on the packrat, genus *Neotoma*. I praised his luminous eyes, his obviously great intelligence, told how he had made his home in an alcove in our attached garage, and how I had failed in my efforts to trap him in a "humane" trap.

I told how night after night my wife and I would bait the trap with peanut butter and apple chunks, his favorite food, according to an oldtimer in the neighborhood, and morning after morning we'd find the trap sprung, the bait devoured down to the last morsel -- and no packrat. No one was able to tell me how he did it, but I mentally christened the bright little fellow with a new name: *Neotoma houdini*.

After much thought, I have developed a theory about how the packrat manages to spring traps without being caught, making off with the bait in the bargain. I think it's a skill he acquired while building nests in cholla cactus.

You are undoubtedly familiar with cholla. Its thorns are excruciatingly painful, especially those of the misleadingly named "teddybear" cholla.

Yet the thin skinned little packrat not only makes its home in cholla, but actually builds its nests out of cholla joints!

The mystery of how the packrat can penetrate and manipulate these potentially dealy objects without impaling itself has not been satisfactorily solved.

But it is clear to me that an animal which can maneuver successfully through the intricacies of the dangerous cholla cactus surely has the ingenuity and agility needed to defeat the operation of a "humane" trap.

Since my previous article I have obtained further proof of the high intelligence of *Neotoma*. When our efforts to trap the animal failed, our first resolve was to accept *Neotoma* as part of the household -- to come to terms with him, so to speak. But (as they say) it takes two to tango, and detente was not in the rat's vocabulary.

Various things around the premises began to disappear; some

Since traps were no impediment to this particular specimen of *Neotoma*, and since we were unwilling to have our house taken

apart bite by bite, I went back to the oldtimer and asked for advice.

Shaking his head, he told me, "You can't have them in the house,

"you get a real smart one that can't be trapped. Then you gotta use these." He handed me a bag of little green pellets that he said were guaranteed to end our packrat troubles once and for all.

Reluctantly, I took them home and spread them around in the

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or in an attached garage. They bring on kissing bugs, and they're bad trouble. It's okay to have packrats in the yard or stable, but you got to get them out of the house." Whereupon he advised me to see the man in the local feed shop.

I knew that the kissing bug, *Triatoma sp.*, produces a painful, venomous bite as it pierces human skin and consumes blood. So with a heavy heart, because I am really fond of *Neotoma*, I made my way to the feed shop and told my story.

"Once in a while," the man said,

alcove where *Neotoma* had built his nest.

For three days I stayed away from the alcove. Then I looked. *Neotoma* was there, bright-eyed as usual. He was sitting in a nest newly made of some greenish substance. I looked more closely. The nest was built -- you've guessed it -- of the same green pellets that had been sold me as "guaranteed to end our packrat troubles."

When I came closer to *Neotoma*, he jumped out of the nest and scampered away. I could have sworn there was a grin on his face.