



# WILDLIFE NOTES

## Woodrat

People mistakenly call them porcupine dens, beaver dens, flood debris, old mountain lion kills, settler's junk piles. Usually a cluster of sticks, about two to three feet across and a foot or two high, these dens are full of cow chips, shotgun shell casings, bones, plastic six-pack rings, keys and who knows what else.

They're found almost everywhere: in old buildings, under trees and bushes, in crevices, underground and right out in the open.

If you wait and watch, you may also get a glimpse of the owner of this mysterious hodge-podge of sticks and collectible items. Commonly called a packrat, his more correct name is woodrat, and biologists know him as a member of the *Neotoma* genus.

Folklore has it that the woodrat exchanges pebbles or previously hoarded items for new acquisitions. Actually, the rat is probably just carting around an item when he runs across your car keys or a discarded shotgun shell casing. Deciding that the new item is more desirable, he drops the one he's carrying in his mouth and makes off with the new treasure. If he doesn't happen to have anything to trade, he'll take your keys anyway!

The woodrat's habit of collecting things is a boon for archaeologists, who often find artifacts in old woodrat homes.

Dens in caves, rock crevices and other protected places are particularly productive because they are less likely to have been disturbed by weather, animals or humans. Lance points, arrowheads, pottery shards, jewelry, bones and teeth have been discovered in woodrat dens.

Another valuable feature of these dens is the plant tissue residue that is found in woodrat droppings. This offers clues to the flora composition of centuries ago.

A woodrat's life isn't all built on gathering trinkets. Woodrats are considered favorite food by practically every predator, including hawks, owls, coyotes, badgers, bobcats, snakes and foxes. In spite of this pressure, woodrats can live to a ripe old age, and three to four years is not uncom-

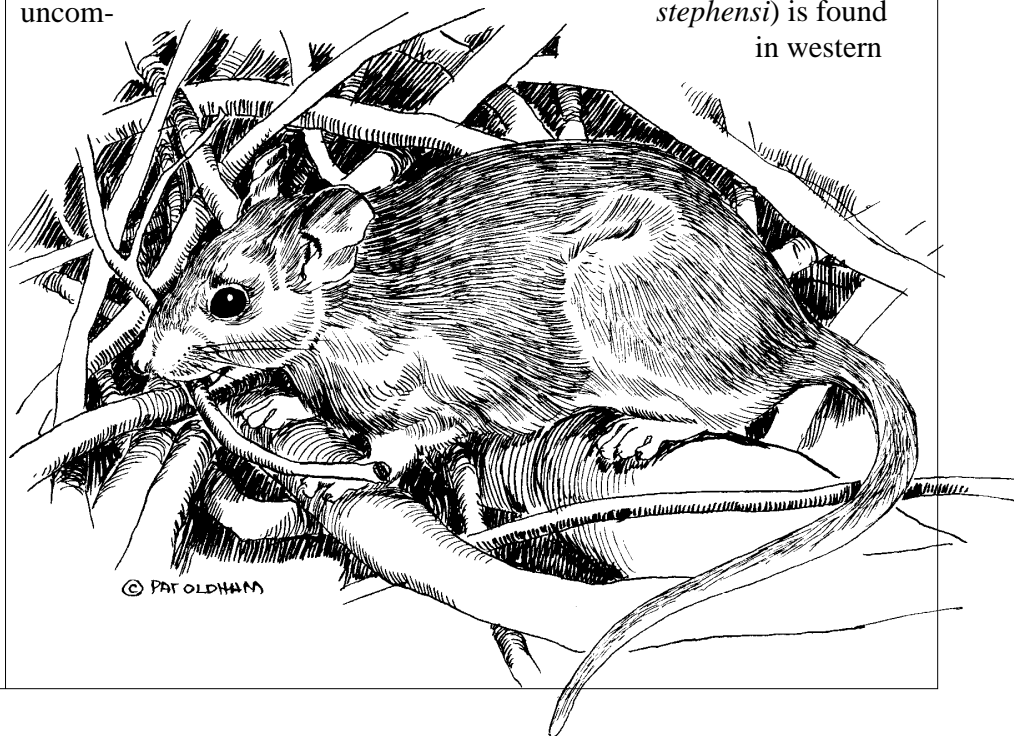
mon. Many, however, don't make it past their first year.

To offset this loss, woodrats breed early and often. A typical litter is two to five young, and a female can have up to three litters a year. At about six to eight months of age, a young woodrat is forced from the den to begin its own life of building dens and collecting treasures.

There are five common species of woodrats in New Mexico. By far the most widespread and common is the white-throated woodrat (*N. albigula*.) It is found from the desert to the high plains to the forest.

The Mexican woodrat (*N. mexicanus*) is more restricted to deserts, though it also occurs in grasslands.

Stephen's woodrat (*N. stephensi*) is found in western



New Mexico and looks so much like the white-throated woodrat that even experts have trouble distinguishing them.

The southern plains woodrat (*N. micropus*) has a uniform, silver coloring and lives in southern New Mexico. While other woodrats have a mix of silver, brown and tawny hairs, this one is almost always a pure silver-gray with a white belly.

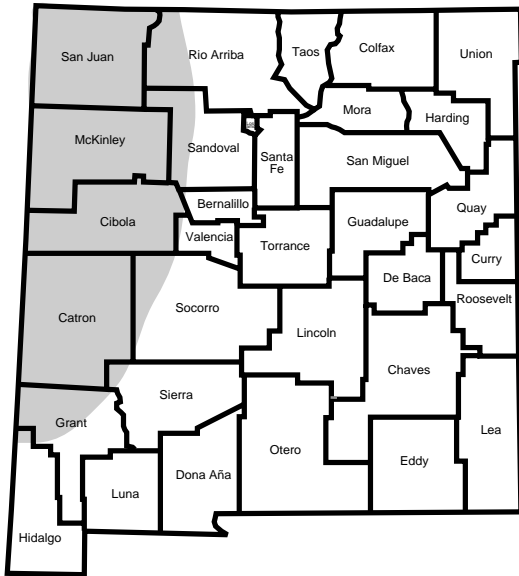
The other common woodrat looks more like a squirrel than a rat, and is aptly named the bushy-tailed woodrat (*N. cinerreus*.)

All wild rats have hairy tails, while "domestic"

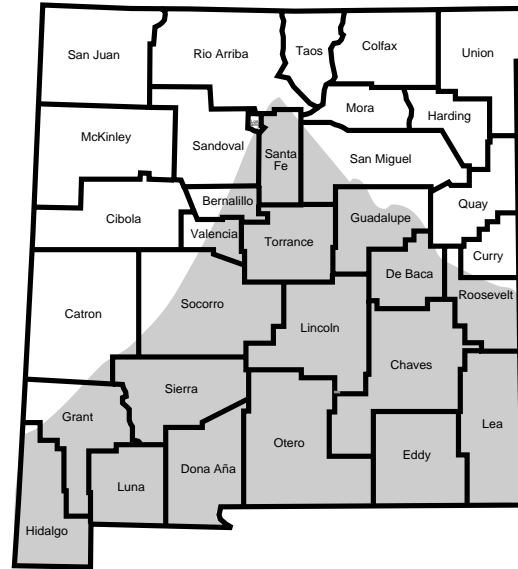
species, such as the Norway and black rats, have naked tails. Wild rats also carry far fewer diseases than their domestic cousins, though any rodent may carry plague.

Just as today's archaeologists learn about yesterday's cultures from trinkets in woodrat dens, so may other scientists puzzle over the things that woodrats accumulate. When these future researchers dig through woodrat dens, though, we recommend they keep their spaceship keys in a safe place, or some enterprising young woodrat will continue a family tradition and add them to his collection.

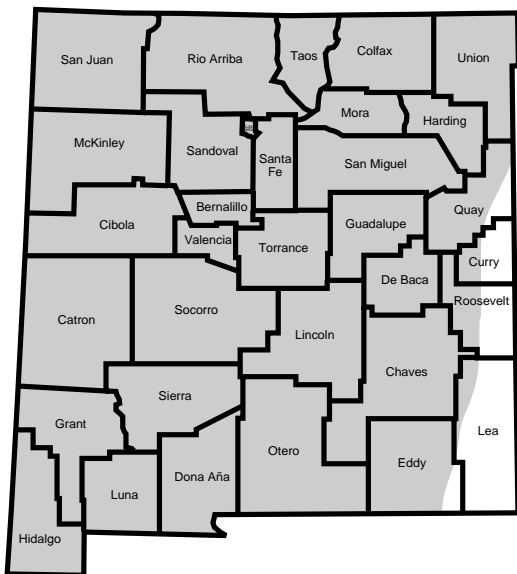
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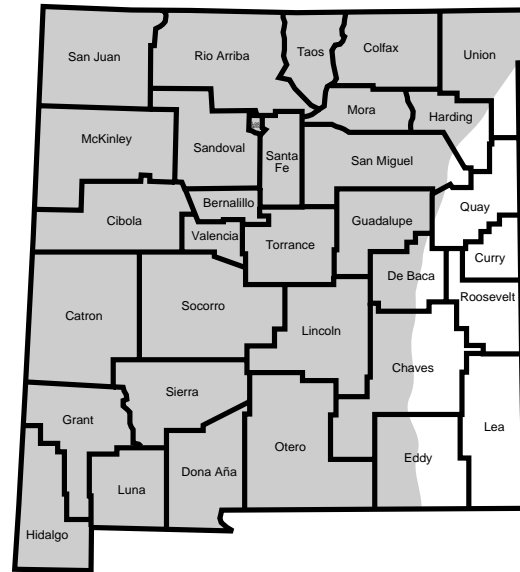
Stephen's woodrat range



Southern plains woodrat range



white-throated woodrat range



Mexican woodrat range