



DISCOVERING THE CHARMS OF AN UNDERRATED SPECIES

by RUTHANNE JOHNSON

The video is four minutes of dazzling skills and daring stunts: Nami and Pepper spinning and fetching, dashing through hoops and over hurdles, and rolling over on cue. In one scene, Pepper dives into an aquarium and paddles to the bottom to fetch peas. Nami takes the spotlight in the “dramatic teddy bear rescue”: Perched atop a dresser, she imitates a seasoned mountaineer, hauling a stuffed animal to safety by rope.

Nami and Pepper aren't dogs, cats, or any other species typically associated with charisma, intelligence, and athleticism. They're pet rats—the domesticated version of *Rattus norvegicus*, a species more often linked in people's minds with sewers, back alley dumpsters, and plague.

With her *15 Incredible Rat Tricks* video, Abby Roeser is doing her part to dispel the negative stereotypes. The Cheltenham, Pa., 10th-grader spent five months preparing her pets for their film debut, the goal of which, she says, is “to show the world how smart rats are.”

Roeser isn't a professional animal trainer or even a longtime rat whisperer. Until last year, when her parents agreed to a small pet, she had virtually no experience with the species. She opted for rats simply because their two- to three-year life span made them a good choice for a teen with college looming.

Practical reasons aside, it didn't take long for her to become smitten. Nami and Pepper came from a pet store—Roeser didn't know about rat rescues at the time—and were initially terrified of people. Their young owner worked to gain their trust, sitting on the floor for hours and using whole grain cereal to entice them to interact with her. “They became more interested in me and wanted to climb on me and sit on my shoulder,” Roeser says. “They never once tried to bite.”

After realizing the cage she'd purchased was woefully

insufficient for such curious, energetic animals, Roeser cut openings in the wire, adjoined two additional enclosures, and added toys, tunnels, hammocks, ramps, and hideaways. With an hour or more of daily exercise outside their cage and training to stimulate their minds and bodies, Nami and Pepper blossomed into affectionate, entertaining companions who come when called and enjoy being petted.

Gray-coated Pepper is the champion jumper and the more active of the two. Cream-and-tan-splotted Nami is calmer and enjoys riding on Roeser's shoulder. Pepper likes salty food; Nami prefers sweets. Both show their contentment by grinding their teeth (“bruxing”) and bugging their eyes out (“boggling”). “I'd heard about boggling, but it did freak me out at first because I didn't think it would be so prominent,” says Roeser. “It's just the funniest thing.”

Such behaviors are typical of happy rats who trust their humans, says Robin Rushlau, adoption coordinator for Falmouth, Maine-based Mainely Rat Rescue. Playfulness is another sign of well-cared-for ratties: “You can ruffle them up with your hand, and they'll do this little hopping around and try to wrestle you with their hands like a kitten,” Rushlau says.

Rushlau became a rattie fan 11 years ago when vacationing neighbors asked her to care for their pet rodent. She was initially

skeptical: “I thought they were just really kind of a strange pet, kind of like a tarantula.” But then Nerak sat in her lap and stared at her with “love eyes.” He came running to the side of the cage whenever he saw her.

“I fell in love with him,” Rushlau says. “I learned everything I could about [rats] and became a rat convert.”

Nami and Pepper (top) star in the *15 Incredible Rat Tricks* video. Pet rats have a talent for adorable poses, as Nami (left) demonstrates.



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Your Pet



Eventually, Rushlau also learned about the tragic side of rats in the pet trade. Like many small pet species, rats are victims of breeding mills and of people who consider them cheap, disposable pets—or snake food. In the last two years, Mainely Rat Rescue has taken in about 1,600 rats. Some came from hoarding situations or were surrendered to shelters. Many were litters born to rats whose owners failed to spay or neuter their pets or unwittingly purchased a pregnant rat.

As a foster caregiver, Rushlau teaches unsocialized, often traumatized rats to welcome human attention. “A rat’s nature is so sweet that it doesn’t take that long for them to come around,” she says.

Roeser also recently joined the ranks of rattie rescuers, fostering animals for Philly Rat Rescue. And while Nami passed away in July after surgery to remove a tumor, her legacy lives on: *15 Incredible Rat Tricks* has provided more than 400,000 YouTube viewers to date with a new appreciation for a much-maligned species. One fan recently commented: “I won’t

lie, I’m terrified of most rodents, however that ... rat is quite possibly one of the most adorable things I’ve ever seen. I love it.”



Precious (top) enjoys some socialization time with a Small Angels Rescue volunteer. Cages sold in pet stores are typically too small for these energetic critters, so savvy rat owners often improvise, as Abby Roeser did by connecting three cages (left).

Don't Call Us Vermin!

COUNTERING COMMON RAT MYTHS

▶ **CLEAN AS A RAT’S BEHIND** Rats are “meticulous about cleaning themselves,” says rattie fan Abby Roeser. “The areas that they cannot reach will be groomed by one of their buddies. ... They form this grooming train. And if you put your head down in the middle, they’ll groom you too.” With training, Roeser’s rats have also learned to use a litter box, returning to their cage for bathroom breaks during playtime.

▶ **GREGARIOUS COMPANIONS** Rats are social animals who thrive with companions of their own kind. They also love spending time with their owners: Even though rats are biologically programmed to be most active at dawn and dusk, they will change their routine to fit their people’s schedules, says Debbie Ducommun, a rat expert in Chico, Calif.

▶ **DON’T FEAR THE NIPPER** Like most small animals, rats can nip when frightened. “Domestic rats still have those deep-seated instincts of being prey animals,” says Teresa Still with Maryland-based Small Angels Rescue. She advises rat owners to speak in a gentle voice, move slowly, and avoid sudden grabs. One way to reform a nipper is to rub gently around the animal’s face, says Robin Rushlau with Mainely Rat Rescue. “Once you do that, they are your best friend.”

▶ **FOR MORE TIPS** on doing right by your ratties, visit humanesociety.org/rats.

FROM TOP: TERESA STILL/SMALL ANGELS RESCUE; ABBY ROESER