

## Under the Hood, a Cozy Rat Retreat



Beatrice de Gea for The New York Times

Ermel Leon, at Z P Auto in Greenwich Village, worked on a car whose cables were chewed by rats. A rat attack can cost car owner hundreds of dollars.

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As if New York City car owners don't already endure enough indignities — \$500-a-month garages, alternate-side parking, the B.Q.E. — it turns out that rats, of which the city has an ample supply, love to cozy up inside car engines this time of year.

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Hiroko Masuike for The New York Times

A rat on Ridge Street on the Lower East Side on a recent morning.

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Hiroko Masuike for The New York Times

A rat on Ridge Street near Houston Street early Wednesday.

“They like to go into the engine’s compartment to stay warm and they build a nest there,” said Gus Kerkoulas, the owner of Z P Auto on Great Jones Street in Greenwich Village. “They hang out, and during the night they must get bored, and they eat the wires.”

The rats don’t discriminate. A new Bentley is as much at risk as a ’78 Buick; a car parked in an attended indoor garage is as susceptible as one on the street, Mr. Kerkoulas said.

Kevin Centanni said that after his [BMW](#) was parked in a private spot next to his house in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, for a couple of days this fall, it wouldn’t start. “When I looked under the hood, there was a nest up in the engine” constructed of plastic bags and twigs, he said, as well as “rat droppings around, on top of the engine and near the battery.”

Fixing a car after a rat attack can cost a couple of hundred dollars or more, depending on the diligence of the rats and the prices of the mechanic. And while city rats are more likely to set up their chop shops in the winter than in summer, it’s a year-round problem.

Sally Schermerhorn said several of her neighbors on the Lower East Side have had overnight guests in their cars’ engines, and she has had them twice in her own. The first time was a couple of summers back; her Buick wouldn’t start, so she opened the hood. “They had a little picnic set up in there, with chicken bones and a little red and white checkered table,” she said.

Just kidding. “But the chicken bones really happened,” Ms. Schermerhorn said. “It wouldn’t run. I called the mechanic, and he said, ‘Oh yeah, the rats ate the wires.’ I said, ‘Oh come on, you can come up with something better than that.’”

Aaron Gruber, whose family has owned Manhattan Alignment and Diagnostic Center on West 131st Street for 30 years, said incredulity is a common response among his customers.

“They think it’s a joke,” he said, and so “we show them the wires chewed up.”

Ignition wires seem to be a particular favorite, he said.

“They do need to chew constantly to wear down their incisors,” he said, “and there’s something about the texture of the plastic that they really like.”

In some cases, having the car fail to start may actually be preferable to the alternative. “Once you start the engine, if a rat is caught between the fan belt, you have a bloody mess and you hear eeehhhhhhhhhh!” Mr. Kerkoulas said.

Afterward, he said, “Someone will come in and say then, ‘I have a real bad smell.’”

After 28 years in the business, Mr. Kerkoulas is not fazed by the cleanup. “We put gloves on,” he said, “and then you move on with your life.”

He said that even if a city dweller has not had engine problems, chances are rats have still visited the car. “I guarantee you that there is not one car in New York City” that you won’t find rat droppings in, he said.

Although the rats-in-cars tales have an only-in-New-York quality to them, anecdotes come from far and near. Greg Gordon just spent \$500 getting his 2003 Honda Accord repaired after rats ate through the knock-sensor system, which monitors how the pistons fire. The car was parked near his home in Greenwich Village. Looking on the Web, he found other Honda owners complaining about rats nesting in their knock-sensor systems.

Mr. Gordon’s car is a hand-me-down from his parents, who had a similar problem in the Arizona desert. “My father was telling me that people will leave their hoods open so animals won’t seek shelter” from the scorching sun, he said.

In 2004, emergency managers at [Los Alamos National Laboratory](#) in New Mexico advised employees to take a fire extinguisher course after twigs, leaves and weeds from rats’ nests caused fires in two new trucks.

It happens “anywhere where rodent populations are high,” Professor Curtis said.

Maple syrup producers have a particular problem with it, and on farms, woodchucks like to get into tractors.

One solution, Mr. Kerkoulas said, is two socks filled with moth balls, an old farmer’s trick. Hang them in the engine — away from any moving parts — and that will deter the rats, he declared. There are side effects, though: the musty smell of moth balls is likely to seep into your car.

As an alternative, Mr. Gruber said, one of his customers sprinkled cayenne pepper around the engine and, so far, the rats had not returned.

Professor Curtis is skeptical of both of those simple approaches, saying, “They have almost no effect in outdoor applications.” He said maple syrup producers used a product called Millers Hot Sauce that repels animals like rats, mice and deer.

Cats may not keep the rats away, but they certainly know about the protection available under a car hood. Mr. Centanni said that a few years ago, a stray cat had crept into his engine to have her babies. “A bunch came running out,” dropping down from the front of the car. Maybe not what one hopes to find under the hood, but at least there were no rats.

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