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The rats come out to play

Rodents livin' in clover as civic strike brings meadow-like quality to parks and a feast of trash

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TOM MCHUGH/PHOTO RESEARCHERS FILE PHOTO

A Norway rat washes its tail.

Along the waterfront parkland there's a new sweetness in the air – an unpredictable bonus in the civic workers' strike.

White clover is growing abundantly, its milky coloured flowers bringing perfume and a rough beauty to wide swaths of green space. City parks are looking less manicured and more like meadows.

Nature is having its way with us. And this part, we like.

It's the unpredictable upside to the strike, which has seen precious little good news, with swimming pools and summer camps closed, and garbage festering in parks and hockey rinks.

With grass left unattended for the most part, there have been rapid shifts in urban ecology – biodiversity increases, plants usually mowed down thrive and go to seed, birds and insects take advantage of the abundance and – downside! – the rat population is sure to increase.

Tom Nudds, a professor of wildlife biology at the University of Guelph, says he wouldn't be surprised at an "explosion" of mice and perhaps rats this year, skunks and raccoons (they usually give birth in the spring) next year. Plenty of food conveniently located in parks improves their winter survival and future reproduction. "The strike could be over by the time the lag effect of the food subsidy – that's what garbage is – kicks in."

The city is slowly being refashioned and naturalized and the urban ecology can change quickly. "We may move to another aesthetic, an increased appreciation of the natural setting," says Mart Gross, a professor of conservation biology at the University of Toronto.

"Plants are food to herbivores and herbivores are food to carnivores. With more plants and less disturbance there will be more herbivores (insects, rabbits and seed-eating birds) eating plants, therefore more omnivores (rats, mice and raccoons) and more carnivores, such as insect-eating birds, skunks and cats and dogs."

This unintentional greening of the city has multiple effects.

With more milkweed, there are more Monarch butterflies. With longer grass, moisture is retained in the soil, earthworms thrive – and robins thrive on earthworms.

Birds such as warblers and vireos feast on insects that are attracted to wildflowers and weeds.

Mice and voles prefer to nest in tall grass, even grass that's grown an inch or two longer. Mice attract hawks and owls.

Besides clover, which is valuable because it fixes nitrogen in the soil, we can see the yellow bird's-foot trefoil and the daisy-like camomile.

Fewer gas lawn mowers at work lead to a reduced carbon footprint for the city and a more interesting ecosystem, says Stephen Murphy, a restoration ecologist from the University of Waterloo. "That may be the biggest potential shift and a potential benefit to the strike."

Orkin PCO, the pest control firm hired to place bait stations for rats at the city's temporary dump sites, says there's no evidence yet of more rats in the city. (It's not known how many there are.) But pest control experts and biologists say with plenty of food in public places, conditions are ideal for the numbers to rise.

Rats will breed more successfully, the babies will be healthier, the females will store reserves of fat and there will be shorter periods between births. Their survival rates will go up, though the strike would have to continue for some months to see this delayed effect.

Rats are enthusiastic breeders. Their gestation period is 22 to 24 days and the average female can give birth seven times a year. One female Norway (or brown) rat – the kind we have in Toronto – can produce 60 offspring each year.

In his 2004 book *Rats: Observation on the History & Habitat of the City's Most Unwanted Inhabitants,* Brooklyn author Robert Sullivan tells us that rats have hearty carnal appetites – first sex, then food.

Though their eyesight is poor, they are driven by their sense of smell, which explains why young children are often bitten on the face by rats attracted by food residues.

Sullivan reports that male and female rats may have sex 20 times a day. "If they are not eating, then rats are usually having sex."

An item of interest to Torontonians as the city enters the third week of the strike: "The only way to get rid of rats is to get rid of the rat food, or garbage ..." Sullivan writes.

Exterminators are putting out "rodenticides" in tamper-proof stations that are fastened to a wall or fence. The rodenticides are anti-coagulants, which will kill the rats four to six days after feeding.

Boris Steipe, a biochemist at the University of Toronto, has been ruefully watching the fetid pile of garbage at the Christie Pits hockey rink. He knows there are rats and mice in the area but he's also concerned about leachate. "It contains human feces, from many diapers, organic waste, a mix of heavy metals, hormones in medications, whatever gets thrown out." He wants the city to test the material and fears the spread of toxins, especially since they can become airborne in droplets.

Dr. David McKeown, Toronto's medical officer of health, said Friday that if the site is managed properly, it should not pose a health risk. "Based on our inspections so far, I don't see any need to carry out that sort of testing," the *Star*'s City Hall Bureau reports.

Brady MacLean was walking his dog Pearl south of Lake Shore Blvd. last week and noticed the longer grass.

He wasn't pleased. It was more difficult to pick up Pearl's droppings and he noticed some dog owners were leaving droppings where they were deposited. The clover looked pretty, he said. "Aesthetically, it looks nice."

But he didn't seem convinced.