

# White-throated Wood Rat

**SCIENTIFIC NAME:** *Neotoma albigula*. From the Greek *neos* meaning “new” (a new genus of rodent), and *tomos* meaning “sharp, cutting” (referring to the teeth), and the Latin *albi* meaning “white” and *gula* meaning “throat.” White-throated wood rats are often called “packrats.”

**DESCRIPTION:** The white-throated wood rat is a relatively large rodent measuring 13 inches from tip of nose to end of tail and weighing about one-half pound. This native rat is distinguished from nonnative rats (such as Norway rats) by its well-haired, bicolored tail, which is brown on the top and white underneath. Fur on the back and hindquarters is brownish interspersed with black hairs. The belly and throat are white. Throat hairs are white to the base, distinguishing this wood rat from others.

**DISTRIBUTION:** Found throughout the Southwest and into central and western Mexico from sea level to as high as 8,000 feet in elevation, this wood rat occurs throughout Arizona except in the area northwest of the Colorado River.

**HABITAT:** The white-throated wood rat resides primarily in arid regions across a variety of habitats. It can be encountered on rocky mountainsides, scrublands and cactus flats, and in pinyon-juniper forests and most other arid habitats. In cities, these rats commonly are found in mountain parks, areas of remnant desert (like intact washes) and undeveloped lots.

**BIOLOGY:** During the day, these nocturnal rats retreat into rock crevices, caves, hollow trees or dens that they build themselves. This species remains active throughout the year.

The white-throated wood rat is often referred to as a packrat because it builds large dens using cactus pads or branches, woody vegetation from trees and shrubs,

and an assortment of other items (ranging from empty rifle shells to bottle caps and bones). These thorny homes offer protection from predators and insulation from the scorching heat. They are usually built in and around paloverde, yucca, cholla, prickly pear or mesquite plants. Some packrats do not build elaborate dens, using rock crevices instead. These crevices also are filled with sticks, cacti and other objects.

White-throated wood rats feed primarily on cactus, particularly prickly pear. They also eat various parts of mesquite, yucca, acacia, cholla and juniper plants, most often the seeds, fruits or bark. Moisture in the cacti they eat appears to provide them with water, and they may not require it from other sources.

**STATUS:** The white-throated wood rat is common and widespread in Arizona.

**MANAGEMENT NEEDS:** This is one of the more common native rodents in urbanized areas. Its ability to coexist closely with humans occasionally creates problems. Wood rats sometimes use vacation homes,

cabins and other seldom-used buildings for shelter. Their stick nests can be extensive and their physical presence and droppings can create a mess. Wood rats sometimes carry diseases and “ectoparasites” (fleas, ticks etc.). Therefore, close association with humans is undesirable. In most nuisance situations, the resident or homeowner can accomplish control.

The best control measure is to prevent the problem through adequate exclusion. Cracks and openings in building foundations — and any openings for water pipes, electric wires, sewer pipes, drain spouts and vents — must be sealed. Also check for openings in attic vents, broken roof shingles or other gaps next to eaves. No hole larger than one-half inch should be left unsealed. Make sure doors, windows and screens fit tightly. If gnawing is a problem, cover edges with sheet metal. Coarse steel wool, wire screen and lightweight sheet metal are excellent materials for plugging gaps. 🦁

■ As the small mammal coordinator for the Arizona Game and Fish Department, Jared Underwood can often be found trapping packrats in Phoenix.



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