

Unwelcome guests!



The story starts back in 2011 when strange things started to happen on Achill island in Co Mayo. Achill is the largest island lying off the coast of Ireland. With miles of unspoilt beaches, spectacular cliffs and a breathtaking landscape dominated by Mt Slievemore in the north, it is both a popular tourist destination and an ideal place for anyone looking for peace and solitude.

A recipe for disaster

Many of the properties are traditional Irish cottages with extensions. One of the properties is owned by a wealthy Dublin eccentric who had been in the process of having his island retreat renovated. Work, however, had stopped and the property was more or less derelict. He was a strange character who believed that Armageddon was coming. As his insurance, for when it did, he was using the cottage to store huge quantities of high protein dried food.

The island has a small population of around 2,600 and is primarily dependent on tourism. As is the norm in rural communities, there is much gossip and it was not long before rumours started. There was talk of rodents in the derelict property and gruesome rumours of animals dying and rats seen feeding on them. Local police were informed, as were the animal welfare people and the council, but no action was taken. When sightings of rats on the ridge tiles of the cottage were reported, one of the concerned members of the

community called in James Heffernan, owner of Co Mayo based Ackill Pest



Vertox solved the problem but nearly 200 bait points were required

A wealthy eccentric, a spectacular tourist destination and a derelict property resulted in one of the most difficult pest control challenges James Heffernan of Co Mayo-based Ackill Pest Control has ever been asked to tackle.

Control, to assess the problem. James explains: "Initially I did an external assessment and didn't see much of a problem. There were holes around the property, but it was when I decided to take a look through one of the windows and saw rats looking out at me, that I realised this was a large infestation and that I would need to get inside to see the extent of the problem! At this stage I didn't have a key to access the property, so until I did, I placed some bait externally, using Roban, PelGar's difenacoum whole wheat bait.

"As soon as I was able to get a key I returned. This was on 23 December 2011. It was a disgusting situation. Plywood had been put between some of the rooms but the rats had chewed through it. New PVC windows and doors had been installed but, interestingly, the rodents had created holes in the concrete, on either side of them. Strangely there were not even any scratch marks on the PVC frames where you would think it would be easier for the rats to access. There were rats everywhere. Looking up at the wooden beams there were rats perched on them looking down at you. They certainly had no fear of humans."

James initially baited the cottage with Roban, using two 20kg bags of whole-wheat bait. The bait was being taken but it was not resulting in much control. He then switched to 20kg of the bromodialone bait – Rodex, but still no success.

"I was at a loss," said James. "I had never experienced such a plague of rats before, nor been unable to control them. I was getting nowhere very fast. Gassing may have been a solution, but I was not licensed to carry out such work, so it was not a viable option. By now it was April 2012 and the bait didn't seem to be working so I



Achill island has unspoilt beaches and breathtaking scenery



A rat population can easily reach plague proportions if left unchecked

rang PelGar's technical director, Dr Jonathan Wade for advice." Jonathan agreed that James was doing nothing wrong in his baiting programme. They discussed the prospect that resistance to the bait may have developed, but rejected this idea as there had been no resistance issues in the area before. They concluded that the problem was just the sheer size of the infestation and it therefore needed a different approach.

Jonathan sent over some of PelGar's brodifacoum bait – Vertox, which is only currently approved for internal use and in situations such as this where the population is living in a deserted property.

Things start to happen

"On the first day I put down nearly 200 bait points throughout the property, using 10kg of bait," said James. "When I returned for the next visit all the bait had been taken. I placed a further 5kgs of bait and the next time I came back the bait didn't appear to have been touched, apart from a few nibbles. Things were starting to happen."

"The bait was now working and the rats were dying. My next problem was getting the property quickly cleared of the rodent carcasses before they started decomposing and smelling," explained James. "The rats were dying in roof spaces, walls and under the floor. My usual contractor just could not deal with the problem, so a company from France came in to get rid of the toxic carcasses and clean the property."

It was clear that this situation arose because of the available high protein food source being stored in the property. And, as the property was derelict, the rats were able to breed unchecked.

"I went back to the property a couple of times to check the monitoring baits I had placed and there had been no take, so I am happy that the rats have been eradicated. My last visit was in the middle of May and although the garden of the property was rather overgrown I had a good look around and there was no evidence at all of rodent activity," said James.

Brilliant solution

"The neighbours had understandably been concerned, especially one that runs a local bed and breakfast, but fortunately the problem seems to have been contained within this one property where the rats had been left to their own devices. The community is naturally delighted that the infestation has been controlled. The Vertox was brilliant for this difficult problem and I have now used it indoors in other premises where it has done an equally good job."

Reflecting on this particular challenge, and intrigued to gauge the extent of the infestation, James discussed it with Jonathan. Given the amount of bait that was placed before control was achieved, Jonathan estimated that there could have been several thousand rats in the property! Rather a lot of unwanted guests.



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