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and BOYD LEUPEN

Rats!

“Rats!

*They fought the dogs, and killed the cats,
And bit the babies in the cradles,
And ate the cheeses out of the vats,
And licked the soup from the cook's own ladles...”*

– Pied Piper of Hamelin

Lucky for the people of Hamelin, there was the pied piper to free them from those terrible little rodents, those horribly repulsive rats!

This, in essence, sums up how most of the world view rats, and perhaps even mice. Numerous negative rat-related expressions and superstitions that date from the Middle Ages still exist today. For instance, there is the belief that a sudden surge in the number of rats foretells a war. And of course, in most parts of the world, rats equal disease – not least, the plague.

But do they indeed deserve to be regarded with so little affection, or is there more to them than we think?

Rodents of the super-family Muridea, which are rats and mice, are extremely widespread animals, found almost everywhere on the planet. Worldwide, there are 1,500 species, 70 of which are found in Southeast Asia.

Rats and mice play a vital role in the food chain, preying on some species of insects, but perhaps more importantly, providing food for a multitude of larger animals, such as small to medium-sized carnivores, raptors and some reptiles.

Scores of these species shy away from human-altered habitats and live deep in the forests, rarely seen by most, and not a threat to cash crops or conservation. In fact, due to human pressures, such as hunting (some species of rats are commonly hunted and eaten by people) and habitat destruction, many of these native rat species themselves may be threatened.

Brown rats will fight fiercely for their lives and will attack dogs, cats, and even people if cornered.