

What is the Vlei Rat?

This is the fourth article in a series about creatures and features of Wildcliff, a private Nature Reserve in the Langeberg Mountains, founded in 2007 by Dr. Ian Giddy and his wife Jenny.

Researchers at the reserve study a variety of animals – birds, snakes, frogs, insects, baboons and other mammals. (See www.wildcliff.org/research.) Both of our surveys of small mammals have encountered a funny little beastie, known as the Vlei Rat (*Otomys irroratus*).

Who would think that anything with the name “rat” could be cute and cuddly? Ariana Malone, that’s who! She’s one of several American researchers who have sought to capture, photograph and release the small mammals of Wildcliff. To see a Vlei Rat nestling in Ariana’s hands made us say – “oh, please let us hold it too!”

How would you know one if you saw it? This rat has dark-grey fur, with light coloured flanks, and a cream coloured belly. The tail is short and bicoloured, brown on top and cream colored on the underside. The Vlei Rat has a stocky build with short legs and large head. The ears are large and furry. (The Vlei Rat is similar in appearance to the Angoni rat but is lacking buffy circles around the eyes.) Its body length ranges from 23-30cm, the tail around 10cm. They can weigh anywhere from 102 to 206g.

As the name suggests, the Vlei Rat occupies swampy areas. Although it favours moist habitats, grasslands will suffice if not far from water. It can be seen at most times of the day and also at night. They build saucer-shaped nests for shelter above water level, but will occupy rodent burrows and tunnels in termite mounds. They create runways from the nesting areas for access to food. Vlei Rats forage singly, or in pairs. Sometimes family groups will go foodhunting together as well. Males are dominant and defend territorial boundaries. The young disperse but sometimes only over short distances (9-12m away from natal foraging ground).

Stems and leaves make up most of the diet, as well as reeds. Grasses are nibbled at the base near the ground and then cut into sections to be eaten. Seeds and bark from trees are also eaten (injuring the tree), which poses a problem in areas where Vlei Rats are abundant.

In our area, the main predators of Vlei Rats include barn owls and snakes. As for reproduction, females produce up to seven litters in one season. Gestation usually lasts for 40 days, one to four young in each litter. Weaning takes place after two weeks, and females become sexually mature as early as four weeks in age. The Vlei Rat can live up to two years.

Our next article will move from the animals to the rocks – the unique geology of the Langeberg. What other subjects would you like to read about? You can reach us at 028 722 2633 or ian@wildcliff.org.

Note to editor: if you wish to include a photo, here's one:



Wildcliff researcher Ariana Malone with a Vlei Rat