

# RAT DYNAMICS

**\*Please note whether you're a first-time rat owner or have not owned a rat for some time below are some things to help you understand.\***

## **2 are not the Same:**

Adopters often ask, "What personality does a rat have?" but it's a tough question because personality depends on both social structure and human interaction. Changes in group size, adding new rats, or the loss of a companion can all affect behavior. Similarly, spending more time with your rats shapes their routines and preferences, while neglect leads to not truly knowing them. While I can't predict each individual rat's personality, adopting two often reveals one adventurous and one shy or skittish rat due to their social dynamics. Investing time in building relationships with your rats is key to understanding them.

## **What Drives the Difference**

Wild rats form complex social groups, with clear roles and hierarchies. When kept as pairs in homes, they still seek to fill basic roles: the guardian, who stays in the cage and protects resources, and the forager, who is more outgoing and often seen as friendly because they want to explore outside the cage. Social needs remain strong, even in small groups.

## **Start Strong**

To support successful adjustment for both rats, it is recommended to spend as much time as possible with them during the first 2-3 months of care. Choose a period when you do not have commitments that would limit your availability. Interact with each rat according to its preferred style of engagement. Initially, consider spending time with them in a controlled environment, such as a bathroom or a bathtub lined with a towel, to observe their behavior while minimizing the risk of escape. Rat-safe areas can be established in any room. Allow the rats to explore their environment freely. They may initially display uncertainty due to transitioning from a rescue to a new setting.

Each rat acclimates at its own pace. The outgoing one tends to explore more, while the shy rat prefers hiding or seeking shelter. Offer comfort to the shy rat by holding it securely, creating a safe space with your hands and body. With regular interaction, the shy rat will seek you out for security. Give attention, affection, and treats to the adventurous rat, monitoring its behavior as it becomes more playful and curious. Spend at least three hours daily with both rats together, adjusting activities to suit their individual needs—this accelerates bonding.

## **Antisocial Behavior or Social Participation**

This section discusses the behavior of more reserved rats, sometimes referred to as "guardian" or "shy guy" rats. While these rats may appear antisocial and withdrawn, they often play a stabilizing role within their groups. If the guardian rat passes away, remaining group members may experience changes in behavior such as increased fighting or symptoms resembling depression, and overall heightened stress levels. Maintaining stability is important for the well-being of the group. For long-term rat ownership, it

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is generally advisable to keep three or more rats together, as pairs can be vulnerable to bonding-related issues if one passes away, potentially affecting health and social resilience.

Initially, guardian-type rats may seem distant toward new human caregivers. This tendency is primarily due to instinctual behaviors that prioritize staying close to familiar territory, which they may defend if needed. To build trust with these rats, it is recommended to spend dedicated time with them in environments away from their cage, using items such as snuggle sacks, blankets, or hoodies to provide a sense of shelter and safety. During bonding, maintaining distance from the cage and allowing the rat autonomy helps establish comfort and security. These rats are responsive to gentle handling and may prefer spending time with humans rather than exploring independently.

As trust builds, these rats tend to stay near their bonded human and gradually become more adventurous. They typically form strong bonds with their caregivers, which may differ from those seen in more curious or exploratory rats.

It is not recommended to leave shy rats in their cage for extended periods, especially when newly introduced to a home environment. Bonding away from the cage can lead to healthier interactions and prevent the development of undesirable habits such as biting, squeaking, fighting, over-grooming, or destructive cage behavior. Regular interaction with all rats in the group is encouraged.

Although reserved rats may require more time to develop trust, establishing a positive relationship contributes to a more harmonious household and strengthens social bonds within the rat group.

## **The Occasional Companion**

Forager rats, while often perceived as extroverted compared to their shy counterparts, do not always fit this assumption. They can be challenging pets for some owners. Early feedback about the forager type tends to be positive, but many adopters observe that these active rats have independent tendencies that may not center on social interaction with humans. Their motivation to leave the cage is largely driven by instinctual foraging behaviors rather than a desire for companionship.

Owners who focus on engaging physically with foragers, rather than shy rats, might notice increased reclusiveness or mischievous behavior. The loss of a forager rat can have a significant impact on its companion, sometimes resulting in emotional distress. The absence of a guardian rat affects group dynamics, occasionally leading to disputes and uncertainty among remaining rats. In small groups, foragers may resist accepting new members and display increased aggression. The loss of a forager particularly influences the guardian rat, leading to reduced emotional support, which may result in health concerns including depression, weight loss, or illness. Maintaining a strong bond between guardians and humans can help mitigate these effects.

Forager rats tend to require ongoing activity and stimulation within their environment. They respond well to interactive play, such as toys, trick training, dig boxes, nesting materials, and puzzle boxes. These activities help maintain their interest and reduce undesirable exploratory behaviors. Over time,

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consistent engagement can strengthen the bond between forager rats and their owners, increasing positive interactions.

It is important to recognize that forager rats generally display more energetic behavior than shy rats. Suppressing this activity may cause them to become emotionally distant. Building a relationship with foragers involves adapting to their behavioral needs, which may shift over time to include more relaxed or cuddly interactions. Both shy and forager rats can form close bonds, requiring patience and ongoing effort from their caregivers.

**Add'l Information:**

<https://afrma.org/choosingpetrat.htm?>