

# Exotic Keepers Forum

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## Acacia Rat – *Thallomys paedulcus*

### TAXONOMY

Acacia Rats are classified as *Thallomys paedulcus*.

### GEOGRAPHICAL RANGE

Acacia Rats are found in Zambia, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Somalia, Mozambique, Ethiopia, Malawi, and Kenya.

### HABITAT

Acacia Rats as their name suggests are often found living in and around Acacia Trees where they make nests of twigs and vegetation in the branches, or in tree hollows. The Acacia Rats live in tropical and sub-tropical savannahs.



### PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

Acacia Rats are very attractive little animals. They range in body length from about 4 to 6 inches with a very long tail. Their tails can measure from about 5 to 8 inches long. Their colour ranges from steel grey on the back to brown-grey, gold and sometimes fawn. Their most distinctive features are the black markings around their eyes and their long black tails. They have a black line circling each eye which can vary in intensity from animal to animal. The head, and upper body are grey, and the chin, underside and feet are white. The tail is long and black with sparse hairs. The ears are tulip-shaped and expressive. In some strains of captive Acacia Rats the males are smaller than the females.

In captivity other colour forms have been developed. These are the Dilute where the coat colour ranges from a pale gold to a light fawn, and the banded where the animals have a white band around their rump.

## **REPRODUCTION IN THE WILD**

Acacia Rats appear to be seasonal breeders in the wild. The breeding season in the wild appears to run from October to May. In captivity Acacia Rats breed throughout the year and the captive breeding of this species is described later in this care-sheet.

## **DIET IN THE WILD**

In the wild Acacia Rats survive mainly on a diet of the leaves and buds of Acacia trees and bushes. They also gnaw the gum from the bark of Acacia trees, and forage for berries and roots. Insects are occasionally eaten too.

## **DIET IN CAPTIVITY**

In captivity Acacia Rats are not able to have their natural diet, but have high energy requirements. They have proved to be adaptable as far as their diet is concerned and thrive on mixes of rodent mixes, small seeds, and insects, with added fruit and vegetables.

My Acacia Rats have turned their noses up at vegetables but are given a wide variety of fresh fruits. These are given in small portions once a day. They also have cooked chicken and canned crickets, and once a week their daily portion of fruit is drizzled with honey.

The mix that I give to my Acacia Rats is made up of equal parts of the following ingredients:

A premium gerbil mix.

An African seed mix containing dates and Acacia seeds.

A softbill bird mix.

Dried mealworms.

Foreign finch mixture.

A mixture of small seeds (mixed millets, black rape seed, canary seed, nigerseed, small pinenuts, linseed, perilla, hemp)

Parrot fruit and nut mix.

## **HOUSING IN CAPTIVITY**

Acacia Rats are arboreal rats so my rats are housed in tall enclosures. My Acacia Rat pairs are housed in 2ft long x 1ft wide x 4ft tall enclosures that have glass bottoms (glass aquarium) and a wood and mesh top. Acacia Rats are world class gnawers so all of the wood used to create their enclosures is covered in fine metal mesh.

Acacia Rats can also be kept in tall all metal cages, but could chew their way out of plastic or plastic-bottomed cages in a very short time. Plastic toys should not be given to these animals as small fragments could lodge in the intestines if

swallowed causing blockages. The same applies to the “cotton wool” type of nesting material often sold as nesting material for hamsters.

I have used both wood shavings and Aspen bedding as substrates in my Acacia Rat’s enclosures and both substrates have seemed to suit them. They have been offered both hay and paper bedding for nesting and seem to prefer the shredded paper.

They have hanging toys in their enclosures to play on and houses and tubes to play with on the floor of their enclosures. They love chewing cardboard rolls.

## **BEHAVIOUR IN CAPTIVITY**

Acacia Rats are active, intelligent and are wonderful interactive pets. Some strains of Acacia Rats have been found to be nippy, but I have been very fortunate that mine have all been particularly tame.

Acacia Rats are nocturnal so they make an ideal pet for “night owls”. They are entertaining to watch as they whizz around their enclosures and they can forge deep bonds with their human companions.

Acacia Rats are very social animals. They can live on their own if a pair falls out or a member of a group is bullied, but if possible Acacia Rats should live in pairs or groups.

It is possible for males to fall out as I had a father and son pair living together until the son reached maturity. The father then continually chased the son around the enclosure so they had to be separated. They are now with female partners.

## **REPRODUCTION IN CAPTIVITY**

Acacia Rats are very difficult to introduce as adults. If introductions of adults are attempted the animals should be placed in totally neutral territory or be introduced using a split-cage. There is no guarantee that adults introduced in these ways will accept the company of each other and nasty (sometimes fatal) fights can occur.

Acacia Rats are best introduced to prospective partners as youngsters so that they pair can grow up together.

The males have an obvious scrotal sac as they mature, but before that time the differences between the sexes can be determined by the distance between the anus and the genitals. The distance seen in the male is approximately twice that seen in the female. Acacia Rats reach sexual maturity at around nine weeks of age.

Acacia Rats have a small number of pups (the average is two) after a gestation of approximately 24 days. Although the average litter seems to be two pups the female Acacia Rat has six mammae so can cope with a larger family. The pups fasten onto the mother’s nipples and when the mother wanders around the cage the pups are often towed along too.

The pups are weaned at around a month old.

It is very, very important that the female Acacia Rat has water at all times when she is lactating. There have been incidents where keepers have lost litters when the female Acacia Rats have knocked the water-bottle from the cage or enclosure and been without water.

## LONGEVITY

Acacia Rats live for about three or four years on average, although they can live longer than this. A friend of mine has an Acacia Rat who is currently five years of age.

*Written by Heather Carol*