



AMERICAN ANTI-VIVISECTION SOCIETY
SPRING 2026

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Coexisting With Wild Rodents

By Rebecca Gooley

My favorite activity is watching the rats at night around Lake Merritt in Oakland, California. As often as I can, I head down to the lake a few hours after sunset and sit quietly on a park bench. Waiting. Eventually—maybe after they decide I am safe, or perhaps because they see me nearly every night—the rats emerge from their burrows and begin their nightly search for food. They are highly social, so I often see them in small groups.

Wild brown rats, the same species as the rats used in laboratory experiments and cared for as companions, build their homes underground. I personally think their building skills are admirable and social connections are inspiring, but that view isn't widely shared. Hidden in plain sight, acts of cruelty persist.

Five years ago, I met a rat I named Peppermint. The day I met her was also the day we said goodbye. She came to my backyard in broad daylight in a desperate attempt to find water as poison coursed through her body. I later learned that someone on my street had put out rat poison. That day, I found so many dead and dying rats.

The impacts of these poisons ripple through the food web, exposing any animal who eats a poisoned rat. Owls, hawks, foxes, coyotes, bobcats, and mountain lions are among the many animals who frequently die from ingesting rat poisons, driving some legislative efforts to ban such products at the state level. Dying from poison isn't just falling asleep and never waking up; the internal hemorrhaging is slow, painful, and disorienting.

Rats experience complex emotions, just like you and me. They play, they laugh, and they cuddle with their family. They can feel scared and lonely. They can also experience anxiety after a traumatic event. For example, rats who have survived being caught in a misfired trap often show

a heightened fear of sudden movements. What happens to them matters to them.

Despite the broadly curated narratives that rats don't belong in human spaces and that their very presence is inherently dangerous, human-dominated environments can be their homes also, and they often have nowhere else to go. They are often here because we are here. Human societies provide ample resources for animals, especially in urban environments where our everyday habits provide a never-ending food supply. It is ethically inconsistent to say that rats don't belong in our societies while accepting the presence of other animals, such as songbirds or opossums.

The brown rat, black rat, and house mouse are the three most common species of liminal (not quite wild and not quite domesticated) rodents. Nearly every human around the world has encountered them. Across countries, cultures, and cities, the nature of the conflict between humans and liminal rodents varies widely, and vulnerable communities are most heavily impacted by this conflict. However, overarching "solutions" remain human centered.

Human-centered approaches are reinforced through villainizing narratives and pejorative language. The word pest, for example, allows humans to collapse a complex, sentient being into a category used to justify harm.

Once labeled pests, animals lose most legal protections, and their suffering becomes easier for many people to ignore. This leads to "management" that lacks moral consideration, such as lethal control with poisons and traps. These practices are often framed as necessary and effective by those who want to eradicate rodents. Yet despite centuries of lethal control, liminal rodents are still here. The current approach locks communities in a never-ending cycle of harm and suffering—for everyone involved.



PHOTOS BY JON PAULING



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Every sentient being should be given moral consideration, and we must strive to find solutions for coexistence. This does not mean ignoring legitimate concerns; subsistence farmers deserve to eat, and communities should be protected from avoidable public health risks. However, we can approach these challenges from a starting point grounded in science, justice, and empathy.

Nonlethal approaches that enable coexistence with stable populations already exist, and they begin with a shift in perspective. Strategies such as improved waste management, rodent-proofed homes, habitat modification, and rodent fertility control focus on reducing conflict, reducing attractants, and communicating boundaries rather than eradicating animals from the ecosystem. These methods recognize liminal rodents as sentient beings responding to the environments we create, and they work with an understanding of rodent ecology.

In Berlin, people have installed pigeon lofts to peacefully coexist with pigeons, caring for them while also managing their

reproductive output. I often wonder how we could extend the same intentionality to rats. What kinds of cities could we create if we focused on coexistence? What would our agricultural lands look like? How might we communicate our intentions to other species?

I imagine cities where liminal rodents are no longer symbols of failure or viewed with disgust or fear but are recognized as members of our shared ecosystem. Cities where people pause, as I do at Lake Merritt, to peacefully watch rats leaving their burrows in the evening to start their nightly activities. Our busiest hours are ending while theirs are just beginning. A world where people see rats not with fear, but as a reminder: We are not separate from nature, we are a part of it.

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Animal Experimentation: Reclaiming the Past and Planning for the Future

By Martin Rowe

Are the animals we study passive objects or active participants? And what do we owe to those confined to laboratories, particularly as new technologies promise to alter and even abolish animal experimentation while also threatening both human and animal subjectivity?

Two recent grants from the Culture & Animals Foundation exemplify those tensions: between working for the abolition of animal experimentation while ensuring that those in laboratories suffer as little as possible, and between working to improve existing technologies and advocating for new ones that might make animal experimentation redundant—while at the same time, setting out clear ethical guidelines to ensure that new technologies don't lead to even greater suffering.

In 2022, a quartet of researchers—Shelly Volsche, Alexandra Horowitz, Anna Korzeniowska, and Holly Root-Gutteridge—received a CAF grant for a paper called “Centring Individual Animals to Improve Research and Citation Practices” (*Biological Reviews* 98:2, 421–433). The paper proposed citation methods that honor the animals sacrificed in historical research to advance human knowledge,

and offers “a method of transparent reporting for future behaviour research that (i) improves replicability, (ii) accounts for individuality of non-human participants, and (iii) considers the impact of the animals' welfare on the validity of the science.”

In their 2025 grant, Rébecca Kleinberger and Lena Ashooh received funding to examine some of the limitations in current oversight mechanisms for animal–technology interactions, research, and deployment—and to propose improvements that center animal welfare in regulatory structures. Their presentation, “What Is an ‘Animal’ Anyways?: From Essentialism to Social Construction Through Research on ACI” was accepted for the International Conference on Animal–Computer Interaction, held in Bloomington, Indiana, in December 2025. As Kleinberger and Ashooh wrote in their report to CAF, “this theoretical work, which emerged from expert discussions facilitated by this grant, examines how researchers conceptualize animal categories in technology research. The paper argues for moving from essentialist to social constructionist frameworks, which could fundamentally change how we approach technology regulation for animals.”

These two grants represent the poles of the current work that CAF is receiving interest in when it comes to thinking about animals in science. On the one hand, we're seeing an effort to revisit the science of the past and reclaim animal subjectivity. On the other, we're noting attempts to ensure that the future is, at the very least, kinder to animals than the present. Given the challenges of what is known as the “polycrisis”—threats posed to the climate, biodiversity, and democracy; and threats posed by rearmament, artificial intelligence, and zoonotic diseases—it's vital that scholars do what they can to push ethics, sentience, and humanity to the fore in discussions around protocols, policy, and practice.

Martin Rowe is Executive Director of CAF.
Learn more at cultureandanimals.org.

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CAF funds projects related to scholarly research, creativity, and performance. Grantee Toh Bright created this mural for the Limbe Wildlife Centre in Cameroon in 2022. Photo courtesy of CAF