



Foothills

Nature Notes

CITY OF PALO ALTO • COMMUNITY SERVICES DEPARTMENT • OPEN SPACE, PARKS AND GOLF DIVISION

Dusky-footed Woodrat

The Dusky-footed Woodrat (*Neotoma fuscipes*), a common resident of the foothills, can usually be found in oak woodlands or in brushy areas along streams. He is widespread within the Upper Sonoran and Transition Life Zones of the Santa Cruz Mountains. His body length is nine inches; a fur covered tail reaches a length of eight inches, the color of hair on his body is grayish brown on top and sides and becomes whitish underneath; and the hind feet are covered with dusky colored hairs from which he gets his name. The furry tail plus clean living habits are factors which distinguish him from his cousin, "the city dump rat" (Norway rat), who came from Europe.

Dusky is sometimes referred to as a trade or packrat; however, he does not actually trade any one possession for another. If you should happen to find an acorn where your watch used to be, try to remember that Dusky has not traded with you. He simply liked the watch more than the acorn and found it too difficult to take both articles back to his nest. Dusky's favorite foods include acorns, leaves of various types, grains, nuts, roots, and when obtainable, meat.

Visitors often can see the woodrat's nest from our trails. The structure is broadly cone-shaped and reaches a height of four feet. Carefully placed sticks afford Dusky a watertight nest and the many exits constructed along the base of the nest allow for an easy escape if predators should threaten.

Dusky lives primarily alone except during mating periods. The young are born around the middle of March and the litter usually consists of three or four. After birth and for a period of fifteen days the completely helpless young remain attached to their mother's nipples. The young remain in this position even when the mother leaves the nest.

The Indians found our little friend to be quite a delicacy and were indeed an enemy of the woodrat. But some of his more natural and



present day enemies are coyotes, foxes, bobcats, owls, hawks, and snakes. The probability of an enemy trapping Dusky in his own home is very remote. It is not uncommon at all to find snakes, frogs, toads, lizards or insects living in an abandoned woodrat's nest.

To observe Dusky and his activities, sit quietly and patiently near a nest during the evening or early morning hours. Dusky is mostly nocturnal and very rarely seen during daylight hours.

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