

HOMELAND SECURITY FOR THE LIVEABOARD BOATER

by Bruce Halabisky

To live aboard a boat is to have a very clear understanding of the boundaries of one's physical domain. Unlike a house on land, which has the transitional zone of a lawn or a basement, or even an apartment, with its hallway and balcony, aboard a boat there is no question as to where one's home begins and ends. Perhaps this is why intruders that might be tolerated in a house (*We really should do something about the mice in the basement . . .*) are shown no mercy aboard a boat, especially a boat that is also one's home.

It was in Hilo, Hawaii, that my wife, Tiffany, and I experienced the first breach of our boat's borders. *Vixen* was tied to the bulkhead in Hilo's Radio Bay — the terminus of an ocean voyage from Victoria B.C. Soon after we arrived, we filled *Vixen's* decks with the bounty of our tropical landfall: racks of bananas, baskets of papayas, tangerines, eggplants, passion fruit and avocados.

We had spent several happy weeks enjoying the jungles of Hilo, much of our food plucked from roadside groves, when one day I noticed a small nibble from the corner of a ripe banana. Could it be? A rat aboard our beloved *Vixen*? Panic stricken, I surveyed the deck — the villain had come and gone.

Immediately, rat-guards were deployed to all lines leading ashore. Security jumped to "code red."

Our innocence prevented us from fathoming a second attack; we gaily continued amassing a hoard of fresh fruit and vegetables aboard *Vixen*.

When we came back to the boat the next evening, we were surprised to see more nibblings. In fact, half a tangerine was missing, an eggplant had been sampled, and our 30-amp power cord had several tooth marks on its banana-

el of professionalism that mocked our pitiful rat-guards.

In a fury, I raised an oar to strike at Ratty. He turned, almost casually, and sprang to the dock-line. He hopped the rat-guard, legs extended like a chubby ballerina, made the bulkhead and galloped off to a dark corner of the marina.

I was left standing on deck, oar still raised, our home violated.

It was a low point of life aboard *Vixen*. Below decks, Tiffany and I held a council of war. Obviously, Ratty was coming and going at will; our defenses were useless against his cunning. Attack was the only option. Funding was allocated from *Vixen's* slim military budget to procure four traps. These were baited with coconut and strategically placed in Ratty's favorite haunts. The following night we lay awake in bed awaiting the fatal "snap."

At midnight I bolted upright when I heard a trap go off. I leaped from bed and flung open the port food locker. There was Ratty, his head caught in the terrible trap. I examined him carefully — he was stunned but still alive.

We had the upper hand, but how to remove him once and for all?

Tiffany suggested grabbing the trap and flinging the whole rat/trap combo overboard. Taking her advice, I reached into the cupboard. As I grabbed the trap, Ratty came to life; he whipped his head free, sprang to his feet and stared at me with his beady eyes.

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colored surface. Impossible! How could this thing have gotten aboard, past the large steel rat-guards? Was it some kind of nibbling bird?

As I stood perplexed, I sensed some movement off to starboard. And then I saw him — a large, pot-bellied wharf rat, with a shiny coat and an intelligent eye. Calmly, he licked a blob of banana from his paw. Like a creature from *The Wind in the Willows*, his face was so expressive and his limbs so dexterous, it was not completely ridiculous to imagine him rowing a boat or even smoking a pipe. His insouciant air implied a lev-

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It was no time to falter, tire, or fail. Ever so slowly, I came at him with a large Tupperware container, then slammed it against the side of the cupboard. Ratty snapped out of his daze but it was too late, he was captured. Only his reptilian tail was free, licking wildly side to side. With Tiffany cowering behind me and my own heart racing, I slipped a lid over the Tupperware, ran on deck, and flung Ratty into the sea.

We collapsed, exhausted from the night's drama. Moonlight shimmered on the ocean's slick surface. Somewhere ashore a dog barked. Without warning, the calm water was broken by a faint black ripple. This turbulence momentarily circled, then moved decidedly towards the boat — Ratty was coming back!

Tiffany grabbed an oar and struck at the water to repel this zombie-rat. Anyone watching from shore would have witnessed a bizarre sight: two naked people, in the moonlight, flailing the ocean with an oar.

Finally, a current caught Ratty, and the black ripple was pulled away from *Vixen*. His silhouetted head grew fainter and fainter until the night consumed him and he was gone.

We sat on deck, spent from the surge of violence on the otherwise peaceful *Vixen*. We had successfully repelled the invader, but would life aboard ever be the same? Our innocence was lost, our Pollyannaish élan crushed. We began to take seriously the stories of swimming rats capable of climbing up anchor chains. We studiously took notes when we heard about flying cockroaches the size of chocolate éclairs, swarms of termites infesting boat interiors, and the insidious teredo worms which feast on wooden boats like our own.

Vixen's military budget grew exponentially. Pesticides were brought on board. Screens were installed. Fruit was locked away. Remembering Ratty, we were preparing for the worst. Clearly, we had entered a new era.