

The NOVA logo is displayed in a stylized, metallic blue font. It is set against a dark blue background featuring a glowing planet with a ring, similar to Saturn, and a starry space pattern.

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NOVA DELVES INTO RAT INVASION—DOCUMENTING AN ENORMOUS ONSLAUGHT OF RODENTS THAT APPEAR EVERY HALF-CENTURY TO DEVOUR ALL IN THEIR PATH

RAT ATTACK

A NOVA-National Geographic Television Special

Tuesday, February 24 at 8pm ET/PT on PBS

www.pbs.org/nova/rats

BOSTON, MA—Once every 48 years, bamboo forests in northeast India go into exuberant flower. And then like clockwork, the event is invariably followed by a plague of black rats that spring from nowhere to spread destruction and famine in their wake. For the first time on film, NOVA and National Geographic capture massive rat population explosion in vivid detail not possible in 1959 when the last invasion occurred. This NOVA-National Geographic Television special exploring the mysterious origins of this natural time bomb premieres on NOVA Tuesday, February 24, 2009 at 8pm ET/PT on PBS (check local listings).

Shot in the Indian state of Mizoram, where the massive onslaught occurred on schedule in 2008, footage shows hordes of rats emerging from the forest right at harvest season—consuming entire crops and leaving subsistence farmers facing starvation. The chance to document and study this remarkable rat outbreak won't occur again for another half-century.

In the film, the world's foremost rat biologist, Ken Aplin of the Australian National Wildlife Collection (and National Geographic research grantee), arrives before the onset of the attack to try to understand the cause of the colossal infestation, which is steeped in local lore.

According to tradition, the regular 48-year cycle of bamboo flowering, seeding, and death, called Mautam, spawns armies of rats, which come out of trees and underground burrows to indulge in the abundance of food.

Aplin, who has been studying rats for 10 years, has been bitten countless times but has no fear of the rodents just sheer enthusiasm and fascination. In the film, he is literally up to his elbows in rats, reaching into a burrow to pull out a litter of rat pups, while looking for clues as to how the invasion is progressing.

"A lot of people are disgusted by rats," he tells NOVA, "but I love rats. They're so successful!"

Also featured in the program is James Lalsiamliana, a biologist with the Mizoram agriculture department, who teams up with Aplin to solve the rodent mystery. At one point they

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inspect a pile of 30,000 rat tails collected in a government-sponsored bounty program designed to reduce the invaders' numbers.

The impressive mound of tails is just a fraction of the over 1½ million rat-tails collected in the region. But this substantial culling appears to have had little effect on the burgeoning rat population.

So prolific are the creatures that local people regard the bamboo seeds on which they feed as a powerful aphrodisiac—a theory tested by Mizoram residents in many home kitchens, where they concoct delicacies with the seeds. NOVA also shows how some members of the populace eat the rats themselves for food.

Rat Attack sheds light on the amazing biology of the black rat and its relationship with the life cycle of bamboo, which has a remarkable biology of its own. "Given the long interval between rat plagues, "this is my last chance to work out what really happens during Mautam," says Aplin, "to get that connection between bamboo flowering and rat outbreaks. And, ultimately, to help local people better cope with the next attack.

Already the clock is ticking on that, due in 2056.

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About NOVA-National Geographic Specials

In 2008, two of the world's premier television science production units announced a multiyear, multiprogram editorial collaboration for a series of new films to be broadcast on NOVA, the PBS signature science series. National Geographic Television (NGT) is known around the world for its remarkable visuals and compelling stories. In 1963 NGT broke ground by broadcasting on American network television the first moving pictures from the summit of Everest. For 36 years, NOVA has produced in-depth science programming and continues to uphold a longstanding reputation for providing unprecedented access to critical science stories including the first test-tube baby, the eradication of smallpox, and the state of string theory. In addition to ***Rat Attack***, NOVA-NGT will premiere ***Extreme Ice*** this year, a film that focuses on climate change shown for the first time through ground-based, time-lapse cameras set by acclaimed photojournalist James Balog. The film premieres on NOVA March 24, 2009 on PBS. NOVA-NGT specials in development include ***The Secret of Machu Picchu*** (working title), an exploration of the many mysteries surrounding the remote Inca city and the remarkable achievements of the culture that thrived there.

NOVA airs Tuesdays at 8pm ET/PT on most PBS stations. NOVA-NGT specials are executive produced by NOVA's Paula S. Apsell and NGT's John Bredar.

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NOVA is closed-captioned for deaf and hard-of-hearing viewers and described for people who are blind or visually impaired by the Media Access Group at WGBH. The descriptive narration is available on the SAP channel or stereo TV and VCRs. To order NOVA direct from WGBH Boston Video, visit shop.wgbh.org or call 800.949.8670.

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Production Credits

Rat Attack

Senior Executive Producer Paula S. Apsell

Senior executive producer, NGT, John Bredar

Producer, Rick King

Co-producer, Jeremy Zipple

A production of NOVA and National Geographic Television

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