

Mice that Furnish Roots Win Hearts of Arctic People

By HOWARD ROCK

In ancient times and down through history, people have had a low opinion of mice. Learned men have devised ingenious traps and chemists have manufactured many poisons to exterminate them.

Although there are undesirable ones in the Arctic, there is one type of tiny, industrious mice that has won the hearts of Eskimos. These mice work fervently gathering food for man.

Through one of nature's bountiful and unique systems, they provide polygonum roots to Alaska natives who relish them as a delightful change in diet.

Without doubt, the resourcefulness of Arctic mice in gathering succulent roots can be compared to bees in the temperate zone that manufacture honey.

The Arctic's little mice store prodigious amounts of these roots in the tundra to furnish,

perhaps grudgingly, needed food for Arctic people.

Polygonum is a leafy plant that grows on the tundra, hugging the ground instead of growing upward. The leaves are green, shooting from the center. The tip of each leaf has a splash of rust color. Looking at the plant from above, it has the appearance of a burst of green spray interspersed with rust.

Long Roots

The main root of the plant, which grows straight down and has one or two branches, sometimes grows eight inches long. The large base of the root reaches 5/8 of an inch in diameter. Since the root grows straight down, it is quite easy to pull it out cleanly by taking hold of the leaves.

Mice gather this root for the long winter's supply of food.

To store them, the busy little animals dig just beneath the grassy tundra, a surprisingly large chamber, usually round in

shape, about a foot in diameter and a foot in depth.

Some Lazy

Some mice seem to be more industrious than others and fill this chamber full of roots. Lazier mice fill it only about half full.

Cache Hunting

In the fall women and children go out on the tundra in search of root caches. They search carefully each likely spot, in order not to miss any cache, if possible.

The searchers walk slowly along the tundra testing the ground underfoot with each step. Presently the ground underneath a searcher's foot gives way and the mother, or one of the children, locates a root cache, then happily announces, "Here's one, right here!"

The mother then slits an opening in the cache just large enough through which to put her hand and forearm.

She pulls the roots out by

handsful. In the process of storing the roots, the proprietor mouse cuts each root into about inch-long, bite-size pieces.

Leave Some

As the mother digs out the roots, she gives her children, as Eskimo mothers have from generation to generation, this warning:

"You must never take all the roots in a mouse cache. Take about half of them and leave the rest for the mouse to eat during the winter. If you take all of them, the mouse will starve and die, and it won't be around next year to gather more roots for us."

Roots are gathered from caches until one or two good-sized seal skin sacks are full. The harvest is taken home for food.

To prepare them another way, the mother washes the roots with water, puts a heap in a wooden bowl, mixes them with a little seal oil and serves

them. Eaten in this manner, they are chewy and half sweet.

Tasty Yams

To prepare them another way, the mother of the house cooks them in boiling water. When cooked, they taste quite similar to sweet potatoes or yams.

Unique Provision

And so, the industrious little mice that gather great quantities of polygonum roots for the long winter's supply of food have been very valuable little animals to Eskimos down through the ages. They are living proof that not all of a species is bad.

The ancient Eskimo, in his search for variety in food, depend upon mice to provide this pleasant change in diet.

As one of nature's unique provisions, certainly the little mice of the far north must be credited with furnishing a novel supply of food for the survival of man in the Arctic.