



Tompkins County SPCA

Wildlife Series

Living With Wildlife

Hundreds of different species of animals coexist in the hillsides and open fields of our communities. As we bulldoze and cement these areas to make room for more homes and bigger roads, animals of all types—skunks, raccoons, opossums, feral cats, mice, foxes, gophers, lizards, and dozens more—are displaced and involuntarily forced to live among us. As a result, animals must find their meals in our garbage cans, raise their litters in our backyards, and mate outside our windows while we are trying to sleep.

As they spill over into our neighborhoods in search of food, frightened by cars and dazed by lights, they end up in our yards and basements where, out of fear and ignorance or for the sake of convenience, we have them trapped and killed, or lay out poisons. It is a tragic story of blaming the victims. It is time we lived peacefully with this new wave of immigrants. With a little patience, a good dose of compassion, old-fashioned common sense, and a few simple and non-lethal tricks, you will be able to keep your garden intact, the garbage lid on, and get a good night's sleep.



The Cruelty of Poisons

The most popular method of poisoning preferred by exterminator companies, is the use of anticoagulants. These toxins cause internal hemorrhaging and take days to kill gophers, squirrels, and other animals. Often, the animals die of dehydration due to a loss of blood, or become unable to eat and slowly die of starvation.

But the victims of these insidious poisons are not just the animals who ingest them. When the dead bodies of poisoned animals are eaten by other animals, such as birds of prey, the toxin enters the food chain where it continues a cycle of misery and death for a variety of other animals.

Trapping: Anything But Humane

Local animal shelters and trapping companies offer an alternative to poisons, but these services are also anything but humane. Almost all wild animals who are trapped are taken to humane societies or animal control facilities, where they are immediately killed. Indeed, often these local humane societies are required to kill these animals if they want the lucrative revenue associated with city and county animal control contracts.

But even if trapping companies offer to relocate the animals, this too is often a death sentence. Most habitats areas are already providing sustenance for as many creatures as can be supported by the limited food and living space. A foreign raccoon, opossum,

or skunk does not stand a chance of assimilating into the area. Many relocated animals become nomads, traveling endlessly on the brink of starvation looking for available space to feed and sleep. In fact, relocated raccoons have been tracked traveling well over 100 miles from their release sites, unable to settle into any unfamiliar territory for very long. Almost half of all raccoons who are trapped and relocated die within the first three months. Many are now familiar sights on our freeways and roads, having been crushed under the wheels of cars while searching for a place to call home.

Compassion through Education

Misinformation and our own lack of knowledge about the temperament, nature, and needs of urbanized wildlife has led to exaggerated fears, particularly of disease, and subsequently to much unnecessary animal suffering. Fortunately, there is no need to resort to painful traps or deadly poisons in our encounters with wild animals. We can, with little effort, learn to peacefully coexist. In fact, armed with some basic knowledge about their habits and little ingenuity, we can outsmart these sometimes pesky critters without bringing harm upon them, nor guilt upon our consciences.

Live and Let Live

For starters, relax! A raccoon running through your yard or a fox foraging on your deck is not a call to arms. Do not overreact by assuming that a wild animal in the vicinity is a threat to pets or property. In the vast majority of cases, such animals are gently, utterly harmless, and likely just passing through. Indeed, most wild animals who have not been desensitized through close contact and feeding are genuinely afraid of humans and will keep their distance. More progressive wildlife rehabilitation centers will also tell you that we have little to fear from most skunks, raccoons, and other wild animals. More people die each year in the United States from being hit by lightning than from contracting rabies from wild animals.



Furthermore, the animals are not with us out of choice. Killing them is no answer. And by shooing them away, we force them to move on to other areas in search of food and shelter, where most will become the victims of further abuse or will simply die in other ways. Remember, a neighbor down the road-the next stop for these animals-may be less compassionate than you. If you can consider picking up your toppled garbage cans a small price to pay for compassion, good for you! But even if you choose to live peacefully with these critters, you should avoid close contact or regular feeding, as this will create a dependence and desensitize wildlife to humans, leading to tragedy in the future. In addition, as the animals reproduce, they will stay in the area because you are feeding them, and will quickly overcome the natural sustainable numbers that can peacefully coexist in the area.

If, however, you are truly experiencing an ongoing wildlife conflict which is too much for you or your family to handle, rest assured that there is a way to resolve your problems without resorting to warfare. As with most things, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. There are a few basic and simple things you can do to eliminate the attractions which brought the animals to your home in the first place.

Animal Proofing with a Mirror and a Bungee Cord

As silly as it sounds, it is effective. Animal proofing is fast becoming the preferred method of wildlife "control," even among exterminator companies. Why? Because it works! Unlike trapping and the use of poisons, animal proofing is a safe and effective solution to human/wildlife conflicts. By eliminating the attractions that bring animals to your home, and by erecting physical barriers, you can condition animals to stay away.



To effectively animal proof your home, you need to think like an animal. Begin by taking a tour of your property to determine what aspects of it would be attractive to a fox, raccoon, skunk, or whatever animal it is you are trying to deter. Are there any places an animal could enter and set up camp?

Spend an afternoon and take a good look at your home from top to bottom: Get down on all fours and look for holes leading into crawl spaces, and climb a ladder-notice any tree limbs in need of trimming which allow easy access to your roof? Any holes in your attic? Take steps to seal these spots with strong, durable materials such as wire mesh. Mice and bats can enter a home from a crack as small as one-fourth of an inch wide! Silicone caulk is a great space filler in such circumstances. And ammonia-soaked rags or steel wool shoved inside holes and crevices are harmless but effective deterrents as well.

No Food Means No Critters

Have you unwittingly created a take-out eatery by leaving food and food scraps accessible outdoors? Be sure your garbage can lids are on tight. Raccoons are strong and remarkably dexterous, so secure your can with a bungee cord if necessary. Recyclables should be clean and rinsed thoroughly of food deposits and smells. And because raccoons, opossums, and skunks are nocturnal and forage for food at night, pet food should always be brought in at dusk.

Scaring Them with Scarecrows

Conditioning animals to stay away is often as easy as using the timeless method of scaring them with scarecrows. Mirrors are also good visual repellents, as they tend to lead animals to believe others are already occupying the area. Strips of foil, balloons, kites, or hanging pie tins are other types of cheap and effective visual deterrents. If scaring them by sight doesn't work, try using noisemakers, such as wind chimes or portable radios.

Guarding the Garden

Gardens offer an irresistible treat to deer, rabbits, and other herbivores. But if sharing the fruit of your labor with a feasting animal is not for you, you can deter much of the unwanted scavenging by taking a little care when planting and building a garden.

Erecting a fence around a garden is the best and most popular method of keeping animals away from your rutabaga or dahlias. Bird netting, a ready-made barrier constructed of weatherproof synthetic fiber, is fairly inexpensive and widely available.

When planting your garden, don't plant all the petunias together in one spot, creating a big and easily located target. Spread them around. By hiding your parsley in your

roses, or tucking a petunia behind a marigold (which tastes and smells yucky!), you can confuse the critters. If that doesn't work, sprinkling cayenne pepper on your plants is a harmless but effective way to condition animals to avoid your property.

Learning to Coexist

Where will they go when condos are built in the fields they once lived in? Where will they bear their young when the brush that was once so hospitable is paved over to make more stores? Where will they eat when the meadows are leveled to build more shops, bigger roads, and room for more traffic lights? What will happen to the rabbits and gophers and opossums and raccoons and the countless other animals that are displaced as humans encroach on and destroy the lands they considered home?

When that happens, they have no choice but to try to live among us, sleeping in our crawl spaces, mating outside the windows, foraging for food in our yards. The vast majority will die, finding themselves no match for the human society thrust upon them. Others will involuntarily become "urban" wildlife, trying to stay one step ahead of the cars, the traps, the poisons, and the host of other man-made dangers.

As we enter the 21st Century, our hopes for a peaceful and harmonious future must include a gentler relationship with animals. A simple and yet important way we can do this to treat them with compassion whenever and wherever we encounter them. After all, it's their world too.

A NOTE OF CAUTION

Before you begin sealing up cracks and crevices, be sure no animals will be trapped inside your home. When you are closing a hole, a good way to ensure that the premises are empty before sealing it is to sprinkle a layer of flour on the area outside the opening. Once you see a set of footprints in the flour that face away from the opening, you know your tenant is out and about, and it is safe to proceed. BUT BEWARE: You should avoid sealing holes during the spring and summer when animals are raising their offspring, unless you are absolutely certain that there are no babies inside. If you cannot be certain, wait to take action until any possible youngsters are grown, and have struck out on their own.

