

SOLUTIONS FOR HUMAN-WILDLIFE CONFLICTS

Introduction

As homes are built on lands that were formerly wildlife habitat, animal populations increasingly come into contact with humans. This can sometimes lead to conflict. Highlighted below are a few strategies to help minimize wildlife-human conflicts.

Nuisance Wildlife

When animals come into your yard or home, they have simply found an element they need for survival (food, water, shelter or space). These animals can root through your garbage, dig up gardens or even take up residence indoors. By identifying what is drawing unwanted wildlife to your yard, it is easier to come up with a plan that solves the problem.

Prevention is the first step!

Take a few precautionary measures to prevent unwelcome wildlife:

- Keep garbage in a garbage can with a raccoon-proof lid. (**Exposed garbage is the most common cause**)
- Do not leave pet food outdoors.
- Consider fencing garden areas if repeated digging occurs.
- Install screens over window, doors and chimney flues to prevent entry.
- Caulk any openings or crevices that animals may crawl through.
- If problems persist, try using the least toxic and most humane control methods first.

Don't Trash Wildlife



If you're hiking, camping, or picnicking this summer—or simply taking a walk in the park—take care to dispose of containers and plastic wrap responsibly. Wild animals are attracted to items you throw away.

Glass jars still smelling of peanut butter, plastic containers with a bit of yogurt at the bottom, plastic food wrap that looks and smells good enough to eat, and plastic six-pack rings all can be deadly to curious—and hungry—squirrels, birds, raccoons, skunks, foxes, and other animals.

Fortunately, it's easy to safely dispose of containers and wrappings—and it only takes a minute or two. Wide-mouth containers can become death traps when animals get their heads stuck inside and suffocate, especially if the containers are narrow at the top. Birds and other animals can easily become entangled in plastic beverage rings, causing injury or death. And any animal—even your own pet—can suffer and die after ingesting plastic packaging that causes an internal blockage. Plastic wrap can be particularly deadly to marine animals and birds, who mistake it for food floating on the surface of the water.

What You Can Do

Rinse and Recycle. Rinse all recyclable glass and plastic containers to remove any food remnants and odors. Any container can be a danger, depending on the size of the container and the size of the animal. Some animals, such as skunks, are particularly vulnerable because their front legs are too short to push containers off their heads. Even containers you're going to throw away should be thoroughly rinsed before disposal to avoid attracting wildlife to your trash.

Cut or Crush. Cut up and/or crush plastic containers before you put them in the garbage or recycling bin. Cut apart each ring in plastic six-pack carriers and other similar packaging.

Close and Cover. Make sure plastic food wrap is rinsed and contained inside a closed garbage bag. Never throw plastic packaging into open trash cans. Put garbage out for collection in plastic or metal trash containers with secure covers.

Solving Problems with Skunks



Occasional skunk sightings in a neighborhood need not be cause for alarm. Preventative measures such as covering garbage cans and not leaving pet food out will help discourage their presence. Also, covering openings under patios, porches, and crawl spaces will prevent occupancy. Always make sure no animal is denning there first.

If a skunk wanders into your garage, don't panic. Just open the garage door before dusk, and wait until the skunk exits for nightly foraging. Sprinkle a wide band of white flour across the threshold, so you can see evidence of exiting footprints. For obvious reasons, keep all domestic animals away from the area. Once the visitor has left, close the door and make sure it stays closed.

Evicting Skunks - Because skunks are nomadic, their residence under your shed, porch or outbuilding will resolve itself in due time: They'll just move on. However, if you must evict skunks from under a building, try spraying a mixture of eight ounces of dish detergent, eight ounces of castor oil, and one gallon of water around the area where the skunks reside. To determine if the den has been vacated, stuff newspaper in the entry hole; if animals are still present, the paper will be pushed out within 24 hours.

The only way to keep skunks permanently out from under a building is to seal the structure off with chicken wire or hardware cloth. It's important to sink the wire down a few inches into the ground, bend it at a 45° angle, and then run at least 12 inches of wire out away from the building in a reverse "L" shape, so a false bottom is created—foiling any skunk who tries to dig back in. A note of caution: Be sure that all animals are out from under a structure before sealing it off; otherwise, the remaining skunks will starve to death.

Windows - Because of their natural nearsightedness and poor climbing ability, skunks often tumble into window wells and are unable to climb out. If the window well is shallow (under two feet), place a piece of wood in the well at less than a 45° angle to serve as a ramp. Make sure the board has a towel or chicken wire tacked to it for traction. If the window well is any deeper, put on heavy gloves, place smelly cheese in the far corner of an animal carrier or plastic rectangular garbage can tipped on its side, and slowly lower it into the window well. The skunk will be enticed by the cheese and should walk right into the container. Slowly raise the can or carrier, elevator style, to ground level, keeping your hands on the outside so you don't risk being bitten. Leave the area. The skunk will soon amble out. It's essential to then purchase or make a window well cover out of heavy wire mesh fencing, or this situation will recur. If you hire professionals to help remove the skunk, make sure they release the skunk on site.

Trapping - Although people's initial reaction may be to get rid of skunks, trapping will not solve the problem, because skunks from the surrounding area will quickly replace those removed. As long as an inviting habitat (brush or rock piles, elevated sheds, and openings under porches or house foundations) exists, skunks will use it. Trapping merely creates turnover in the population; in springtime, this can result in orphaned, starving skunks wandering around neighborhoods.

Rabies - People often have exaggerated fears about rabies and skunks. In the central United States, skunks may contract their own strain of rabies or serve as a "spillover" species for the raccoon variant that is currently present in the mid-Atlantic and Northeastern states. However, since 1980, only one human death has been attributed to the skunk strain of rabies in the United States. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, the few human deaths from rabies—on average two to three a year, nationwide—have largely been due to the bat strain or canine strains contracted overseas. The bottom line is that people stand a far greater risk of dying from a falling brick or bad hamburger than from skunk rabies. Nonetheless, it's important to take proper precautions by calling your local animal control officer if you observe a sick, disoriented skunk in areas where rabies occurs.

What's That Smell? - Skunks use their strong-smelling spray to defend themselves—in fact they don't have any other form of defense. The spray is composed of sulfuric acid that can be "fired" from either of two independently operating anal glands. Skunks stamp their front feet as a warning when threatened, giving you a chance to back off. Dogs, however, tend to ignore this warning. That's why it's hard to find a human who has been sprayed, but easy to find a dog who has. Skunk odor on wayward pets may be neutralized with liberal amounts of vinegar or tomato juice. This will make the odor tolerable—only time will eliminate it. A reported deodorant recipe for skunk spray that can be used on animals and clothes includes these ingredients:

1 quart 3% hydrogen peroxide
1/4 cup baking soda
1 teaspoon Dawn® liquid dish soap

Apply liberally and hold your nose!

Chlorine bleach, ammonia, or commercial products containing neutroleum alpha may be used on inanimate objects—do not use these on any living thing. Carbolic soap and water are safe to use on skin. Liberal flushing with cold water will ease the discomfort of skunk spray in the eyes.

For Skunks, Love Stinks

To skunks, "love stinks" is more than a snarky comment about the casualties of courtship. It's a reality.

Amorous skunks do their courting in February and March, the height of mating season for striped skunks (*Mephitis mephitis*), which increases the chances that these docile animals will attract unwanted attention with their signature scent. The stinky problem occurs when a male skunk tries to court a female who may not be "in the mood." Unlike the sweet-smelling gifts of perfume or flowers that often accompany human courtship, the aroma generated when female skunks spray their rejected suitors is downright offensive to people. Luckily, skunk romance only lasts a short time, and the noxious odors soon waft away.

This malodorous spray, which is the skunk's only means of defense, has given this gentle, non-aggressive animal a bad reputation. Skunks actually make for excellent neighbors—their dietary preferences include insects, grubs, mice, and even baby rats. Skunks are also solitary and nomadic, except when raising young or sharing a den during cold periods. They den in natural cavities such as woodchuck burrows, hollow logs, and brush piles, as well as crevices in stone walls and under buildings. Baby skunks are usually born during May and June. Once the babies are mobile, the mother will travel with her young, who will trail behind the elder skunk in a single file.

A Skunk Under the Porch

Because skunks are wanderers, they will move out from under a shed, porch, or outbuilding in due time. However, if home or property owners are determined to evict skunks, try the following:

- First, determine whether the skunks are still inhabiting the space by spraying a mixture of eight ounces of dish detergent, eight ounces of castor oil, and one gallon of water around the area. (This mixture should convince any resident skunks that the den has become, well, too smelly to occupy).
- After spraying, lightly stuff newspaper into the entry hole. If the den is still in use, the paper will be pushed out within 24 hours.
- Wait a few days before trying the procedure again.
- Another option is to affix a "one-way door" to the entry point, which will allow any animals to leave the area but not to return. For more information, [download our list](#) of manufacturers and suppliers of products used to resolve wildlife conflicts.

Once you're sure the skunks are gone, you can keep them (and most other wildlife) permanently away by doing the following:

- Seal off the entry points in the structure with chicken wire or hardware cloth.
- At ground level, bend the wire at a 45-degree angle, and then run at least 24 inches of wire out away from the building in a reverse "L" shape.
- Firmly secure the wire to the ground with landscaping staples, making sure there are no gaps. This creates a false bottom and will foil any skunk who tries to dig back in.
- Keep your garbage cans upright and do not leave pet food outside. This will also help discourage skunks.

Solving Problems with Raccoons



Given the raccoon's superb ability to adapt to changing environmental conditions, it's not surprising that conflicts with humans often occur. Raccoons aren't averse to raiding gardens, garbage cans, bird feeders, fish ponds, or even your kitchen pantry (a pet door is an open invitation). Likewise, chimneys, attics, and porches are all attractive denning sites from the raccoon perspective. Cities and suburbs also provide extensive "subway systems" for these intelligent and opportunistic animals, who are quite comfortable using storm sewers as underground roadways.

Raccoons can cause damage, such as getting into crops, or they can simply be nuisances by occupying chimneys or "panhandling" at campgrounds. Before you begin taking steps to resolve a raccoon problem, however, make sure the animal causing your headaches really *is* a raccoon. Raccoons are often blamed for more damage than they actually do, while neighborhood dogs and crows get off scot-free.

If you're not able to observe the animals directly, your best bet is to identify their tracks. Flour, cornstarch, and other nontoxic powders can be used to check for footprints on hard surfaces. Raccoons who are using attics or chimneys usually begin to make noise at dusk and just before dawn. (Conversely, tree squirrels are active by day and quiet at night.) The sound of raccoons' movement is a helpful clue—unlike the light scurrying of squirrels, raccoons sound more like Sumo wrestlers practicing. If young cubs are present, you may also hear chittering or purring noises, especially when the mother returns to the den.

Waiting things out is often the best option—many raccoon problems, such as occupation of a building, resolve themselves within a few days or weeks. This is particularly important when a mother raccoon with young is present. Raccoon cubs are unable to fend for themselves for a long period of time after birth, and usually do not even venture out of the den until eight or nine weeks of age. In emergencies, gentle harassment may encourage the mother to relocate her young, but there is always the risk that one or more cubs may be abandoned in the process. Trapping and moving the family will almost inevitably lead to separation and the probable death of the young.

Chimneys and Attics: Raccoons will often use uncapped chimneys and attics for denning and for birthing and raising their young. Assuming the animals can leave on their own, harassment techniques can be used to encourage raccoons to move on. You might try leaving the attic lights on, and/or placing a battery-operated radio in the denning area, tuned to a talk radio station with the volume turned up. The best time to use these strategies is right before the raccoon would normally leave for her nightly foray. Once you're sure the animals have left, prevent further problems by installing an approved chimney cap or repairing and sealing attic openings. *Never use smoke or fire to drive animals out of chimneys.* This will almost certainly kill young animals—whether raccoons, squirrels, opossums, or birds—who are not physically able to leave on their own.

Yards and Gardens: Discourage garbage raiding by placing cans at the curb on the day of pick-up rather than the night before. Place cans inside a shed or garage between pick-ups. You may also secure the lids with bungee cords, rope tie-downs, or weights. Raccoons are attracted to birdseed and suet, and can cause considerable damage to garden fruits and vegetables, particularly grapes and corn. Garden plundering often occurs right before the foods are ready to be picked, so extra vigilance at these times (chasing animals away and using lights or radios to create disturbances) may drive them off long enough to harvest the crop. Fruit trees and bird feeder poles can be protected with conical metal guards that keep animals from climbing.

The Humane Approach to Human-Wildlife Conflicts



The humane approach to human-wildlife conflict is based on three general principles:

- **Respect for the environment**
- **Tolerance and understanding of living things**
- **A willingness to resolve conflicts using nonlethal means**

Appreciating the natural environment we share with other living things is one of the most important components of wildlife conflict resolution. Often the first and best defense is to let natural forces resolve the issue without human intervention. Human tolerance and understanding are also crucial since many so-called wildlife "problems" arise out of our irrational fears. For example, realizing that a backyard raccoon is not a threat but a member of a natural community removes the immediate impulse to have the raccoon removed.

Nonlethal conflict resolution is an area most people have only just begun to investigate and understand. The following six-step evaluation will help you resolve wildlife conflicts safely and humanely.

Determine the problem—and consider whether it is a problem at all. Learning about the habits of your wild neighbors will help you decide. For example, if a family of woodchucks moves into the backyard, will they attack your child or your pet? Educating yourself about the natural history of these animals will help you see that they aren't a threat.

If there is a problem, collect information to better deal with the problem. It is necessary to positively identify the species involved, the extent of the damage, how long it's been happening, whether there are young animals present, and what can be done to resolve the issue in a humane and permanent way.

Assess the seriousness and extent of the problem. Important considerations involve safety or health concerns to people or pets, likelihood of recurrence, and whether the damage appears to be seasonal or ongoing.

Take action, but only after all the facts have been collected. Taking action should be one of your last steps, and it should not have to involve killing animals. Exclusion, environmentally sound repellents, changing human cultural practices, and habitat modification are all viable, nonlethal strategies.

Evaluation. Did your action resolve the problem or merely address the symptoms? Your solution should get at the underlying cause of the problem and be effective over the long-term.

Seek help. You may not be able to resolve the problem by yourself. Click on the links below for information on where to buy appropriate products or seek help with sick, injured, or orphaned wildlife. You may also visit "A Closer Look at Wildlife" on the left navigation bar to learn more about some common wild neighbors.