What should you do when a skunk moves into your crawlspace?

When Animals Behave Badly

Story By Bob Bluett
Photos by Adele Hodde

Illinois residents usually enjoy seeing wildlife. But not everywhere.

The fact is, some seemingly "wild" species manage to thrive within city limits and—all too often—decide to get cozy right in your home. It's actually a common occurrence. And for some species, including raccoons and coyotes, population densities can be greater in urban areas than in remote, rural areas of Illinois where hunting and trapping keep their numbers in balance.

Example: At one site in the Chicago area, coyotes attained a density of about three animals per square mile. Few studies conducted in rural parts of the United States have reported numbers that approach this figure.

Example: Raccoon populations sometimes top 100 per square mile in the Chicago metro area. Elsewhere in the state, they rarely top 20 to 40 per square mile.

While folks from the Chicago area tend to be tolerant of their wild neighbors (a recent survey indicated about half of the residents reported they enjoy wild animals and nearly as many valued seeing wildlife on a daily basis), problems are bound to happen when you mix 8 million people with abundant critters. Fifty-eight percent of the respondents had experienced conflicts with wildlife in the past year and 12 percent

A different breed of home invaders is afoot in Illinois cities. Human-wildlife conflicts include everything from squirrels in attics to skunks in crawlspaces. But there are ways to evict unwanted wildlife and critter-proof your home.

reported incidents of wild animals moving into attics, chimneys or other parts of their homes.

During 2003, people licensed by the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) serviced nearly 56,000 wildlife conflicts in northeastern Illinois and captured almost 46,000 animals, mostly raccoons and squirrels. Those numbers are up about 60 percent from a decade earlier.

Even wildlife biologists aren't immune. This summer, a family of raccoons made a habit of raiding my bird feeders. Switching from sunflower seeds to thistle or safflower, or using a squirrel-proof feeder might have helped. But I enjoy my old feeder—a wedding gift that's gained a lot of character over the years. We made our peace by filling it daily with about enough seed to last until dark.

Some problems, like mine, are benign. But the waters get murkier as you move on to lawn excavators, stoop miners, pool inhabitors, shed dwellers, poop depositors, home wreckers and even pet killers.

What constitutes a problem is often a matter of perception.

The official definition of a wildlife problem is "damage to property or a risk to human health or safety." Some situations, like home invasion, require removal of animals as part of a larger solution. To do so legally, you need a license, stamp or permit.

Illinois' trapping regulations are designed for licensed fur harvesters. Laws protect the resource and set standards for animal welfare. Trapping under authority of these regulations is usually impractical in residential areas. For example, fur harvesters are required to obtain permission not only from the landowner, but anyone residing within 100 yards of where a trap is set.

The most comprehensive reference on wildlife damage prevention in North America is the Internet Center for Wildlife Damage Management at www.wildlifedamage.unl.edu. Laws vary from state to state and some of the methods recommended by this site are prohibited in Illinois. If you are unsure about the legality of a method, contact the DNR Office of Law Enforcement duty officer at (217) 782-6431.

The Fur Hunting and Trapping in Illinois website (www.dnr.state.il.us/orc/wildlife) provides information about many Illinois mammals, including their habits, reproduction and tracks.

The white-tailed deer (Illinois' state mammal) represents a landscaping issue for suburban homeowners. During the fall, bucks can shred small tree trunks with their antlers. Edible vegetation—including pricey ornamentals—is fair game all year.

Laws geared specifically to nuisance situations allow more latitude but require a free Nuisance Animal Removal permit. The permit, which is good for a maximum of 90 days, specifies the means by which the animal may be taken and disposed, and can be obtained from DNR offices.

About 170 municipalities, mostly in the Chicago area, have Nuisance Wildlife Control permits. Many loan traps to residents experiencing wildlife problems. If you capture animals under authority of their permit, you don't need your own.

Commercial businesses with Nuisance Wildlife Control permits tend to offer a wider variety of services than municipalities. Many advertise in the yellow pages. Another option is to call a DNR office for a list of businesses that service your area.

All too often, I've had frantic calls from do-it-yourselfers who set traps for raccoons or opossums and wound up with a skunk. Or people who captured a raccoon in the spring, carted it away, and didn't realize she had a litter in the attic until youngsters started crying from hunger.

My advice is to stick with a professional—either from animal control or a private business—and then follow up with exclusionary measures to fend off more problems.

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Necessary openings in your home should be covered with animal-proof barriers to reduce the temptation for shelter-seeking wildlife.

An ounce of prevention...

If you live in a neighborhood with mature trees, expect squirrels and raccoons to test your defenses. Homes with overhanging branches are especially vulnerable.

Chimney caps are a must, as are grates or sturdy mesh covers for your attic vents. Endcaps can be placed on dryer vents to exclude sparrows, starlings and small rodents from accessing a toasty nesting area.

Above-ground decks and outdoor sheds are an open invitation to raccoons, opossums, foxes, skunks and woodchucks (groundhogs) if the clearance between the ground and structure is less than a foot or two. Chicken or welded wire can be bent into an "L" shape and buried 10 to 12 inches underground to discourage diggers.

Water gardens need a deep area—the deeper the better—located under a 12-inch overhang to discourage herons and raccoons from stealing fish. Plastic netting is a more secure but less aesthetic option.

For those of us with asphalt shingles, replacement is a matter of time. Joints along dormers or other features that break the main plane of the roof are the first to go. Inquisitive squirrels or raccoons may follow. Keep the roof in good shape and you'll avoid wildlife, mold and insect problems.

Some repellents work, some don't. Commercial types that prevent browsing by rabbits, deer and other herbivores are fairly good but need to be reapplied after a rain. Ammonia, mothballs and other home remedies sometimes work in small, enclosed places like chimneys or under stoops, but not in attics or other large areas.

Predator urine and other "eviction fluids" are sometimes successful at encouraging animals to move on, but, like mothballs, work best in confined places.

Forget balloons, scarecrows, plastic owls and other "scary" stuff. They just don't work.