

JUST WHAT IS A 'NUISANCE' ANIMAL?

By Share Bond

Animals such as the skunk, opossum, raccoon, squirrels, coyote, rattlesnake, fox, etc. are labeled as nuisance animals or vermin, when in fact they are very important to our ecosystem. They rid our neighborhoods of mice, rats, harmful garden pests (gophers, snails, plant-destroying grubs, beetles, etc.), creepy things that people don't want around their homes (cockroaches, black widow spiders, scorpions).

Solutions and remedies won't be covered in this article since it would take too much space, but if you need this information, feel free to contact your local wildlife agency or animal services department.

BATS are useful predators and help to control insects. A single little brown bat can consume up to 3,000 mosquitoes every night. Many species of bats are endangered. They do not chew holes or electrical wiring if they should get in your attic.

COYOTES could benefit the community by reducing the numbers of rats, mice, and other small mammals, if residents would stop providing them with even more convenient meals - intentionally left out food or by leaving small pets outdoors without supervision.

They are often blamed for garbage damage done by loose dogs, especially for taking livestock, which are mostly taken by packs of domestic dogs.

MICE AND RATS are gnawers and can cause damage to buildings, especially when they chew through insulation and wiring. Rodents are drawn to stored food, and can contaminate it with their feces and urine. They are drawn to bird feeding stations and pet food.

Even though you can learn to coexist with these animals, if you have taken all measures to rodent-proof your house, it is much easier to let the local wildlife keep these populations down and away from your home.

OPOSSUMS do not dig holes. They are transient; so never stay in one place for more than 2-3 days. They are placid and docile, except to the real vermin that they eat - rats, mice, snails, and other garden pests.

RACCOONS are a comical neighborhood clean-up crew. Like the skunk, coyote and opossum they keep down the populations of REAL pests. As long as you don't leave your pet door open at night, and holes to your attic they shouldn't be a problem.

SKUNKS are another very misunderstood and maligned creature. Many myths were created to justify killing this animal instead of risk getting sprayed. Once you know what their body language means and how to act around them, they are very easy to coexist with - provided you keep your dogs inside from dusk to dawn. Watching them from afar can be a wondrous means of entertainment!

They too rid your neighborhoods of rodents and harmful garden pests. They have been known to kill and eat rattlesnakes, black widow spiders, scorpions, and centipedes, being immune to the venom.

OTHER LARGER CARNIVORES such as the bear (omnivore), mountain lion, wolves, etc. can be a safer coexistence if you take certain precautions. If you are camping, hiking, jogging or bicycling in an area that is known to have any of these animals, you should educate yourself

about bear boxes and other proper containment of food, and REAL facts about these local animals. For instance, if you should ever find yourself being chased by a mountain lion or encounter a bear, DO NOT RUN. You will become a toy, and more enticing to chase. Remember, stop, make yourself larger (put your child on your shoulders, bicycle or jacket over your head, make threatening movements). They will stop in their tracks and run away.

You can contact your local Wildlife Agency to get tips on how to coexist with your problem wild animals, or how to get in contact with wildlife groups who are more specialized in the animal you have questions about. Again, trapping is only a temporary solution. Take the time to find out more about this animal and the simple things you can do to improve your relationship with nature.

All of these animals would prefer to live as far away from humans as possible. Even though people are encroaching on the homes of these animals, many learn to adapt. A skunk, opossum or raccoon are perfectly happy to live under your home. But the real reason they are there is because people lure them there. They create their own problems by leaving a steady supply of pet food outside (95% reason); improper storage of pet food in their garage; leaving their pet door open during the hours that these animals forage for food; improper garbage storage; not closing off holes in attic, under homes or in fences; even unprotected compost heaps.

There is a great availability of room and board. A downtown environment is almost ideally suited for nuisance critters. Trees, old houses, and abundance of edible trash make downtown a prime spot for warm-blooded creatures great and small. Raccoons can grow to 30 pounds on a feral gourmet diet of pet food and human leftovers. Downtown is also home to legions of opossums, rats, and other animals.

Here is a picture of a wildlife haven. This customer doesn't want the deer to eat his beautiful roses, or the skunks, raccoons and opossums to drink from his lily pond, waterfalls, or live under the open decks. But he complains that they are turning up his flowers and lawn. If he had a better fence, and a closed off deck, they wouldn't be able to get in. These aren't easy solutions and are costly, but there are simple solutions. Rather than trap every animal and relocate them elsewhere (better than having them killed!), he could mix a solution of 8 oz. of castor oil, 8 oz. of dish soap (mix well), then add to 1 gal. of water, and spray around yard to ward off these animals. This solution conditions the soil and doesn't damage the lawn or flowers.

There have been extensive studies that prove that trapping and removing wildlife never works. You are wasting your time and money. More of these animals will move in to the abandoned territory. As long as the unnatural food supply remains, they will have larger litters, more females, and more litters. This unique reproductive strategy is a safeguard against extermination. It is not fair to these animals to lure them there and then kill or disrupt their lives, most of the time making orphans of their offspring that are left behind.

The average person doesn't know when mating or baby season is, nor do many of them care. People in the business of trapping and extermination are in the business to make money, so they give you the option to trap. There are some that care about animals and just want to do what you ask, so they relocate or transport to wildlife rehabilitation facilities or to a wilderness area. But a responsible wildlife consultant will not give you this option. It does not work!

Almost always when people are having problems with skunks, it is because pet food is left on or near the ground. Once the food is removed, they relocate themselves (usually to another home that leaves food out for them, but then maybe I'll get a call from them as well).

More and more people are looking for more humane solutions. When people are looking for help, they call Animal Control and Humane Societies, where they many times turn people away and tell them that they don't go out on these calls any more, and to call a trapper or borrow one of their traps. But when they do come out in response to your call, since many callers don't think or care to ask what will happen to this trapped animal, they find out the hard way that they are destroyed. Do not assume that they will be delivered to Shangrila.

Well-meaning people often create problems by giving handouts to wild animals. What they don't realize is that they are really killing them. It should not be done for these reasons:

- 1) It teaches them unnatural behavior. A skunk used to finding food on this person's porch will beg at the neighbor's porch. The neighbor then calls to have the animal removed and then it is destroyed most of the time.
- 2) Even high-quality cat food causes obesity, liver failure, and metabolic bone disease in most of these animals.
- 3) It keeps them from doing their important job of ridding our neighborhoods of real pests.

What it really boils down to is that, according to nature, humans are really the nuisance animal.