



Beasts in the Garden: Living with Urban Wildlife

By Jennifer Jackson

The striped skunk, aka *Mephitis mephitis*, almost seems the victim of a cruel prank played by Mother Nature. Its small stature, thick jet-black fur contrasted with crisp white stripes, and luxurious tail should make it one of the darlings of the wildlife world – if it weren't for the fact that they smell awful, spray curious pets, and sometimes get into chicken coops.

Living with them is actually something that some folks do. My parents in Idaho Falls have had mama skunks living under their shed off and on over the years. In the summer of 2009, it was part of my parents' early evening ritual to sit at the dining room table with a bowl of ice cream and watch through the picture window as mama paraded her little kits across the lawn to the garden. My dad always has enough bounty in his garden to share with everyone – us kids, his neighbors, and the occasional skunk or cottontail.

During one of these evening excursions, one of the tiny kits fell into the window well. My father was able to scoop it up out of there with a shovel. Of course, he could have also just leaned a wooden board at an angle in the well so that the young skunk could crawl out – which is always a good

idea for any critter trapped in a window well, especially those that can bite or even spray.

This summer, the skunk hotel under my parents' shed was closed. Apparently, my dad's cat, Miss Katie, filed a complaint

with the management last year when she was struck in the face with a stream of liquid stink from the upset mama skunk. It was hard for me to take sides.

On the one hand, I respect the right of the mama skunk to protect herself and her babies and truthfully, Miss Katie is a bit of a diva. I enjoyed a laugh at her expense. On the other hand, Miss Katie is mostly an indoor cat that likes to sleep on the couch and with my parents. I felt sorry for her as her prim and proper self sat dejected in my parents' garage, her eyes watering.

Even if you are not a fan of skunks and wouldn't tolerate a skunk under a shed as my father and mother have done, don't sell the little guys short either. In the right situations, skunks are actually beneficial as they do remove unwanted rodent and insect pests and will eat carrion. The key is to prevent conflicts before they happen.

Jennifer Jackson is the regional conservation educator for the Southeast Region.



Fish and Game biologist Jon Rachael tranquilizes a young black bear that has wandered into town. Many urban residents enjoy seeing wildlife, such as skunks, raccoons or Canada geese that take up residence in Idaho towns. But bears and other large animals that can be a greater safety hazard are less welcome guests.

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Home, Sweet, Home, Where the Deer and Other Wildlife Play



Mule deer find refuge and plenty of good stuff to eat in many urban areas of Idaho, but having deer in town increases the risk of drawing in an occasional mountain lion, which prey on muleys.

By Vicky Runnoe

Most people tend think of towns as places humans live, not wildlife. Urban dwellers are often quite surprised to see deer in a local park, raccoon tracks in the snow, or a hawk in their backyard.

Folks aren't always aware of their wild neighbors. Learning that a great horned owl is nesting in your neighborhood can come as quite a surprise to some. So is the coyote glimpsed when leaving for work early one morning.

But they also serve as a reminder

of the danger when migrating deer and elk cross city streets and major thoroughfares during morning and evening rush hours.

Wildlife can survive in urban environments as long as they can find food, water and shelter in an appropriate space. Many communities provide quite a bit of habitat for wildlife, such as parks, greenbelts, river corridors, nature centers, ponds and spacious backyards.

Urban wildlife comes in many forms – squirrels chattering, deer in the park

or the muskrat in the local pond, small rodents such as mice and voles to larger animals. Many small carnivores also have adapted to city life.

The kinds and number of wildlife in our communities depends on the time of year. A winter

with a lot of snow and cold can bring deer into town.

When these animals find food and shelter, they are likely to stay until spring. Once the weather improves most of the deer will leave. But sometimes a few stay and become urban wildlife.

Seeing wildlife in town is exciting, and many urban residents enjoy knowing that their community still has its wild side. But living with wildlife in town can present challenges, especially when wildlife gathers in large numbers, usually at food sources.

When animals find food, they often return and when they do, they often bring their friends. And in numbers, they can damage ornamental landscaping and destroy gardens.

With the exception of birds, feeding wildlife is not recommended – in some cases it is illegal. Mammals can become dependent on easy food handouts. Wildlife that gather at food sources are also at risk for

spreading disease to other animals and to humans.

When animals become accustomed to people they are less wary and may be more aggressive; people who feed them can get chased, bitten, kicked or worse.

It's important to remember that urban wildlife is wild. Observe and enjoy them with respect at a distance.

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How to Keep Urban Wildlife from Wearing out Its Welcome

Viewing wildlife around homes can be relaxing, enjoyable and educational. Under the wrong circumstances, however, wildlife can become nuisance wildlife and cause property damage or dangers to people and pets.

Suggestions to prevent or reduce problems with wildlife include:

- Don't store garbage outdoors; keep it in a secure building in rodent proof containers.
- Don't leave pet food outside.
- Clean the barbeque thoroughly.
- Seal holes under porches, decks, sheds, foundations and crawl spaces.
- A mouse needs only a quarter-inch gap and a rat a half-inch gap to enter. Use wire screening, lightweight sheet metal or coarse steel wool to seal gaps. Rodents can gnaw through wood or plastic.
- Remove brush, woodpiles and junk that could serve as den sites.
- Fence gardens with mesh wire, and

pick up and fallen fruit regularly.

- To prevent skunks from burrowing under a garden fence, extend it about 18 inches underground.
- The top of a garden enclosure may have to be covered with woven wire or other fencing to prevent raccoons from climbing over.
- Don't let pets, especially dogs, run loose at night.
- Seal gaps around the roof, attic vents and eaves to keep out birds and bats.
- Skunks and raccoons and other animals can use two-way pet doors to enter homes and garages.
- Outdoor composting should not be done in bear country.

Landscaping with plants that provide wildlife with food and shelter can be attractive and benefit wildlife.

Butterfly and hummingbird gardens provide food and shelter to these insects and birds and adds countless hours of

viewing enjoyment. Shrubs and trees can attract nesting songbirds, and provide shelter for small animals.

But landscaping also attracts browsing animals, resulting in damaged trees, shrubs and other ornamental plants.

For a list of deer resistant landscaping plants see Fish and Game's brochure, "Home Builders and Owners Guide to Living with Wildlife," or visit the Fish and Game Web site at: http://fishandgame.idaho.gov/cms/wildlife/manage_issues/brochure.pdf.

Who do you call, when urban wildlife becomes nuisance wildlife?

Local animal control, animal rescue, or law enforcement in emergencies and USDA Wildlife Services are good sources for help, information and advice.

Idaho law allows people to trap or remove any wildlife to protect private property and personal safety, but just like the plumbing, sometimes it is better to get help from a professional.

Local Fish and Game offices also are good sources of information and advice. But Fish and Game generally does not respond to nuisance wildlife issues unless big game critters – bear, lion, deer, elk or moose – are involved, but local offices can often provide loaner traps.

There are often many professionals in urban communities who specialize in nuisance wildlife control who can help with rats and bats and everything in between. Nuisance wildlife may not be released live without a permit from Fish and Game. But native wildlife classified as predatory or unprotected wildlife, including skunks and raccoons, may not be released without written permission from the landowner at the release site, and you must have the written permission in your possession while transporting them.



Acres of grassy parks and human tolerance have made Boise and other Idaho cities havens for thousands of Canada geese - enjoyed by many, reviled by others.

Idaho Fish and Game Policy

Idaho wildlife management policy is set by seven volunteer commissioners. The Idaho Fish and Game Commission's policy decisions are based on research and recommendations by the professional staff of the Idaho Department of Fish and Game, and with input from the governor's office, the state Legislature, hunters, anglers and the public.





This beaver is caught in a trapper's snare along the Greenbelt in Boise's Municipal Park. Damage to trees along the river leads officials to trap the industrious rodents and move them out of the city.

Tasty Landscaping Attracts Moose Into Town

By Mark Rhodes

Every winter, Idaho Fish and Game gets calls about moose in town.

They are attracted by edible ornamental and native plants and shrubs that are easy food sources.

Generally the moose appear on the edge of town. Sometimes, however, they will find their way well into suburban neighborhoods or downtown areas.

This winter several moose found their way well into the city limits of Coeur d'Alene. This creates quite a stir and a long list of possible problems.

Fish and Game usually recommends giving the moose a day or two to find its way out. If it found its way into town, it can find a way out. That is the favored option.

Many people expect Fish and Game to show up immediately and move the moose. That sounds far easier than it actually is.

Drugs administered by a dart are used to subdue a moose. The drug is hard on the moose's system, and can be fatal if it is especially agitated or its weight misjudged. A moose rarely goes under the influence of the drug right where it gets darted. They can move a considerable distance through neighborhoods once darted. When it finally succumbs to the tranquilizer, it is heavy, and eight

people are needed to carry it to a modified horse trailer.

The drug used on the moose is dangerous to humans. Fish and Game is always concerned about the possibility of an errant dart being lost where it could come into contact with people.

Having a moose in town can be novel and interesting but only for a short time. They incite neighborhood dogs. They surprise people heading to the newspaper box. They cause problems with traffic. And most of all they become agitated and dangerous when approached too closely by people.

Anyone who encounters a moose should not approach it. A moose that feels threatened can be a danger to people. People should keep their distance, keep something substantial between themselves and the moose, and leave it alone.

If the moose has been given some time to leave, and does not, call the nearest regional Fish and Game office.

Mark Rhodes is a district conservation officer in the Panhandle Region.

