



Dave Menke/USFWS Photo

# Over The Hedge

*By J.R. Hill*

Urban wildlife – friend or foe? For many citizens of West Virginia, this is becoming a more frequent question. As movement to the suburbs continues and additional habitat is cleared for home sites, problems with local wild animals continue to increase. A thin line exists between an enjoyable evening of viewing wildlife in your backyard and a bear eating dog food on your back porch.

This problem is present in many of our cities that are in fact, refuges due to municipal laws against hunting or trapping. With no natural predators and in the absence of regulated removal through hunting and trapping seasons, many of these

animals flourish to nuisance proportions.

In most instances where homeowners are having trouble with various species of wildlife, they call the local Division of Natural Resources office for help. Due to the volume of these calls and the manpower available, DNR personnel cannot possibly handle all situations. In many cases, they can provide technical assistance in the form of suggestions on how to control the problems and may be able to provide some equipment to help in the solution. More often than not, however, homeowners are looking for someone to come out to their property and rid them of the nuisance wildlife.

In 1996 the DNR sponsored a bill which won legislative approval to license animal damage control agents. Prospective agents must complete an application, pass a background check, pass a written test on damage control, wildlife identification and behavior, and knowledge of trapping and other control techniques. Applicants must also have a valid West Virginia Business License. They must pay a \$50 license fee and maintain daily records. Licenses are renewed annually and must be accompanied by a summary report that includes species involved, the type of damage or nuisance encountered and the disposition of the offending animals.

When you call an animal damage control agent, you generally pay a fee for the agent to come to your property, assess the situation, and set out control equipment. The agent then returns daily to check the equipment and remove the captured animals. You then pay a fee for each animal removed. Though the fee may sound a bit high at first, you must consider the numerous nights and travel often required to resolve the problem.

Reports indicate that the greatest wildlife “offenders” are bats, raccoons and groundhogs. Opossums, squirrels, skunks and snakes follow those top three in order of most calls received. Other common nuisance animal problems involve pigeons, black bears, ducks, songbirds (pecking on windows for weeks), and of course, deer.

Exclusion of wildlife from a house or outbuilding is often the best line of defense. The material needed varies with the species of animal. Sometimes it is as simple as caulking around pipes entering the house but other situations may require expensive fencing. Remember, fencing must be buried in the ground for species which are good at digging.

Odor repellents are sometimes effective on mammals but are useless against birds because they have a poor sense of smell. Taste repellents are effective against some mammals but must be reapplied after steady rain.

In rural areas, shooting or trapping the offending animals may be effective but can be done only when the hunting season is open for that animal and guns can't be discharged within 500 feet of a dwelling. Lethal control measures outside open hunting/trapping seasons can be authorized through deprecation permits issued by DNR law enforcement or wildlife personnel.

In many cases, these offenders can be live-trapped and relocated or euthanized. Whether you do it yourself depends on your attitude, physical abilities and skills, time and income. To obtain a live trap similar to the one shown, visit your local feed store, hardware store and some rental companies. You can also purchase them online. A few suggested sites include: [www.tomahawkshivetraps.com](http://www.tomahawkshivetraps.com), [www.woodstreamcorp.com](http://www.woodstreamcorp.com), [www.havahart.com](http://www.havahart.com).

If the homeowner desires, a licensed animal damage control agent can be hired to remove the nuisance animal. These agents now furnish a service that the DNR simply was not equipped to provide. For more information on animal control, check the DNR web site and click on wildlife damage control. For control



*Some animals, such as the opossum, can be easily live-trapped.*

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agents you can also look in the yellow pages of your phone book under pest control for ads who mention wild animal control.

This article doesn't begin to cover the variety of calls the DNR receives but should provide some ideas to deal with the more common problems. Wild animals can make interesting neighbors but when they cross the line and become a pest, you can take action to protect your property and for your peace of mind.

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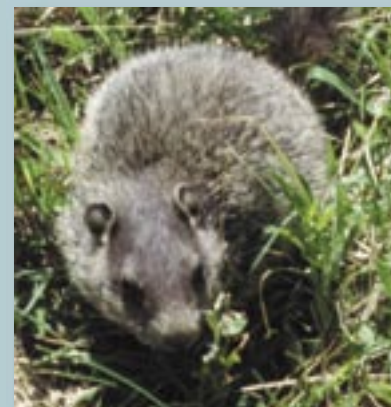
## GROUNDHOGS

Groundhogs, also known as woodchucks, can be unwanted neighbors because of their digging habits.

They can tear up landscaping and they are prone to feed in vegetable and flower gardens.

Fencing is an expensive but effective way to keep woodchucks out of your garden. The

stout fence must be buried a foot underground and extend 3 to 4 feet above the ground. Repellent sprays tend to be ineffective. In rural areas, woodchucks can be shot year-round.



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# SQUIRRELS



Glen "Tink" Smith

Squirrels can get stuck in chimneys or take up residence in attics. Screening the chimney top can prevent the former problem while closing up holes around the eaves, soffits and attic vents can solve the latter situation. Moth balls may get the unwanted guests to move for a few days until you can close off the openings.

# RACCOONS

Raccoons are often enticed into backyards by unused pet foods and garbage bags left outside. They sometimes raid bird feeders. Simply removing leftover pet food as soon as your pet finishes eating and keeping your garbage in a building often solves the problem. Raccoons are relatively easy to live trap. NEVER try to pick up a raccoon – they can be aggressive and deliver painful bites and scratches.



Rick Layson, www.forestryimages.org

# OPOSSUMS



Randy Cyr, www.forestryimages.org

Excluding opossums from under the house is fairly simple. If one is already residing under your house, block the opening after it leaves for the evening or use ammonia-soaked rags to chase it out.

# SKUNKS

Skunk problems are obvious. Even if they have not sprayed, there is always a lingering odor that most people find offensive. They too are known to be enticed into the neighborhood by unattended pet food or inappropriately handled garbage.

Skunks sometimes take up residence under outbuildings, decks, and even in crawl spaces under houses, the latter creating serious problems for homeowners.

To keep them out of your home, block all openings that lead under your house. If a skunk has taken up residence under your house, sometimes



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putting rags soaked in ammonia under the house will chase them out for a couple days. Close the opening off immediately after they leave. Because they are nocturnal, you might keep watch one evening and when you see it leave, close the opening behind. Be sure it doesn't have young under the house.

Live trapping a skunk is a more delicate issue than with other mammal or bird species due to the odor issue. It involves covering the trap, an action which calms the animal some as well as creates a barrier should it decide to let loose.

# WOODPECKERS

Woodpeckers hammering or “drumming” on houses is not only annoying but can also cause expensive property damage. Woodpeckers hammer to attract mates, to establish and defend territories, to excavate nesting sites, and to search for insects. Wooden shingles, cedar or redwood siding, metal or plastic guttering, television antennas and light posts are selected as drumming sites because these materials produce loud sounds. Wooden siding is also attractive to woodpeckers as hollow spaces behind the siding can indicate that insects are present in the wood or that the wood is soft enough for nest excavation.

Shooting the offending birds is not a valid option as they are protected by strict state and federal laws.



DOWNY WOODPECKER/George Seiler

Several control techniques are available. If the structure is infected with insects the first step is to exterminate them because they are an attractant to woodpeckers. Next, promptly fill all holes with patching compound. Then, metal flashing, tin can tops, or quarter-inch hardware cloth can be temporarily placed over the old holes to prevent further damage.

To keep the birds from the house, ¾-quarter inch garden netting can also be anchored three inches from the wall of the structure. Another technique proven effective is the use of pie pans, strips of Mylar, or balloons hung from eaves overtop the affected area.

Most bird experts warn against the use of sticky substances or loud alarms.

# SNAKES

Snakes are often attracted to homes by mice, so getting rid of mice will often make them head somewhere else. Keeping the area around the house mowed will discourage them. Placing wood and rock piles away from the house also helps, as does filling holes in stone walls.

Odor repellents and traps are ineffective. Closing off openings to the house or underneath the house greatly reduces the chances of a snake getting into the house.



GARTERSNAKE/Michael Witt

# BATS

Even people who appreciate bats do not always appreciate them establishing residency in their homes. And for those who don't appreciate them, their presence generates fear along with health concerns. Little brown and big brown bats are the most common bat species found in houses in West Virginia.

In most cases, careful examination will reveal small openings where the bats are entering. The remedy involves blocking the opening with caulking, weather stripping, or quarter-inch hardware cloth. Placing rags soaked in ammonia or spraying a mixture of 1 part water to 3 parts ammonia near the roost may get them to leave temporarily.

During the summer, the bats may have young in the roost, so it is best to wait and block the openings later in the season after the bats have departed for the winter.

If a bat happens to stray into your house, the easiest way to get it back outside is to open a window or door and let the animal find its way out. One can also cover a bat on the floor or a wall with a heavy towel and carry it outside to be released.



LITTLE BROWN BAT/Craig Stithier