

Homes & Real estate

Originally published June 14, 2013 at 8:04 PM | Page modified June 17, 2013 at 11:32 AM

What to do when wild animals make your home their home

How to keep wildlife from moving into your house and how to evict them when they do.



By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times



EcoConsumer

We all love wildlife, but not in our house.

When squirrels, raccoons or other critters take up residence in the attic or walls, or wreak havoc in our yard, many of us freak out. We feel invaded, and we may consider desperate measures to evict them.

But these animal squatters usually are just looking after their families, like we are. When we get too aggressive responding to them, we can harm innocent creatures and might not even solve the problem. As Sly and the Family Stone sang, “We got to live

together.” It’s their city too, and their planet, for that matter.

Alas, menagerie

Coexisting with urban wildlife doesn’t mean they should be in your house, or even hanging around your yard too much. In the attic, animals leave behind feces, urine and food remnants that may cause odors. They gnaw on wood and wires, potentially creating a fire hazard.

Wild animals occasionally attack pets and humans when threatened. Canine distemper, a contagious disease affecting many animals (not humans or cats), was reported among raccoons in King and Pierce counties in 2010 and 2011.

In the hierarchy of urban wildlife, raccoons and squirrels are perched at the top. Raccoons, who seem smarter than us, are often big and aggressive. The main problem with squirrels is there are so dang many of them. Rats are also a constant concern, although they are such a familiar presence around people that they are hardly even considered wildlife.

Opossums typically don't cause many problems and are not as likely to get in your house. Opossums can be beneficial for your garden, eating slugs, insects and even small rodents, according to the national Humane Society.

Birds may roost in the attic or crevices near the roof. Bats and feral (wild) cats also may sublease part of your home or property.

What's that scratching sound?

Urban wildlife biologist Russell Link with the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) offers these tips once you hear animals in the attic or elsewhere in your home: Identify the species, so you know how to proceed; find their main entry; determine whether young animals are present, and if so, evict the animal family only as a last resort.

Consult the WDFW's excellent online resource "Living with Wildlife" for detailed removal and prevention techniques for various critters. Never use poison. You may be able to encourage animals to leave by banging on the wall, or by tossing stinky rag balls near the nest. Link recommends sprinkling the rag balls with "predator urine available from farm-supply centers, hunting shops, or over the Internet."

If animals pose a threat to your household's residents and it seems too difficult or dangerous to deal with the problem yourself, hire a professional from the WDFW's online list of licensed Nuisance Wildlife Control Operators. Live trapping of animals is usually best left to professionals.

If you find injured or orphaned wildlife, don't try to help them yourself, but consider contacting a trained and licensed wildlife rehabilitator, such as the nonprofit South Sound Critter Care in Kent.

These animal-rehab organizations are listed on the WDFW website.

Get a leg up

Save yourself a load of trouble by taking preventive measures to keep critters from entering your home or causing problems in the yard.

To foil squirrels and other energetic jumpers, try to keep trees cut back so branches are at least 10 feet from your house. Unfortunately this is impossible to achieve at many homes in our region unless you chop down your trees or your neighbors' trees, which is not recommended.

Sealing up entry points to your house is an essential step in critter invasion prevention. Remember that animals can squeeze through tiny holes. If possible, seal your attic from the inside so you don't have to do dangerous ladder work. Anywhere you see light coming in from outside, seal the hole.

Never leave pet food outside the house. If you have a pet door, lock it at night to keep raccoons and other wildlife out. You could also install a pet door that only opens with an electronic signal from a special collar your pet wears.

If you feed birds, be careful. Suet feeders often attract rats, who hang from them for a late-night snack. Thistle feeders are a good choice. They attract beautiful chickadees and colored finches but squirrels and other critters don't like thistle seed.

Wild animals can be such a pleasure to see, so let's enjoy them. They usually won't move permanently into your house or yard, as long as your home isn't overly appealing to them. After all, to quote another classic song, they were born to be wild.

Tom Watson is project manager for King County's Recycling and Environmental Services. Reach

him at tom.watson@kingcounty.gov, 206-296-4481 or www.KCecoconsumer.com