Living with Raccoons

by Anne Muraski

As human development encroaches on more and more habitat, the highly adaptable raccoon has been forced to find a home in our neighborhoods.

Raccoons are valuable scavengers that clean up ornamental fruits and berries, and root out insect colonies. They also prey on mice and help maintain ecological balance in our urban lakes and ponds. They are as intelligent as dogs and cats, but have far greater manual dexterity. Here are some humane, environmentally responsible tips for dealing with "raccoon encounters of the unwanted kind."

Raccoon in the house

Sometimes an animal may enter your living space through a pet door or other opening and be unable to find the way out. Raccoons can cause considerable damage if made to panic, so keep calm and do not approach or corner the animal. Confine pets and children and close off other parts of the house. Open windows and doors, leave the area, and wait quietly for the animal to leave. If the animal is agitated, shutting off the lights may help calm him and can make the escape route more obvious, especially at night. You also can try putting a treat such as peanut butter by the exit. Never make direct contact with the animal—call The SPCA if these measures do not work.

Raccoon in attic or under house

Most animals only use our homes temporarily to raise young during the March-August baby season, so if at all possible, consider cohabitating until young leave the nest (6-8 weeks). The deterrents listed here should never be used during baby season as they may kill offspring and prevent mom from returning.

Structural flaws such as unsealed foundations, missing vents, unscreened crawl spaces and unrepaired attic openings are usually the cause of the problem. The first sign of unwelcome "boarders" may be noise and activity at dusk and early morning. Even mice can make considerable noise, so you must confirm what type of animal is cohabitating first, hopefully by observing it exit the nest site forage in the evening—this may take some patience.

Once you know the entry point, simply seal the entrance after making sure there are no boarders inside—a visual check is best, using a bright light or mirror if necessary. Try sprinkling a thin coating of flour near the entrance and check it frequently for tracks leading out.

Raccoons like to sleep in places that are warm, dark and quiet, so deterrents can help ensure the animal has moved before you seal entrances. Employ these methods at night, after the animal has left the den to forage. Light the area with a flood lamp, play a radio or soak the area with a hose. Raccoons have sensitive noses and don't tolerate moth balls, ammonia-soaked rags (to maintain odor, use a rag to wick ammonia out of a bottle) or a liberal sprinkling of cayenne pepper in their sleeping quarters. Raccoons can be very tolerant once established, so be patient and try using a few of these deterrents in different combinations.

Raccoon in chimney or on roof

The smoke shelf in a fireplace flue is a common den and nesting site for raccoons. If babies are present, wait until they are old enough to accompany mom on her evening forays, and make a visual inspection before capping your chimney—uncapped chimneys are a fire hazard and are an open invitation to wildlife. You may need your flue cleaned to remove flammable nesting material beforehand.

Never try to "smoke out" animals from a chimney—they can be overcome with smoke and then you will have the problem of physically removing them yourself. Sometimes animals may not be able to go out the way they came in, so be prepared to follow the directions under "Raccoon in the House."

Sometimes raccoons may tear up shingles to get at insects. Trim tree limbs to prevent access to the roof, or put up aluminum flashing on tree trunks to prevent climbing. Metal sheeting should be two to three feet wide and positioned four to six feet above the ground.

Raccoons and domestic animals

Keeping chickens, waterfowl or other domestic animals outside without protection is an open invitation to predators. Domestic animals who live outside need protection from raccoons and all predators, especially at night.

Raccoons are extremely dexterous and have no problem opening hook and eye closures, clip fasteners such as those found on pet leashes, and many other wire

This article is reprinted from the "Quarterly Release," the newsletter of Friends of Monterey County Wildlife.

Friends of Monterey County Wildlife is an auxiliary that helps support the Wildlife Rescue and Rehabilitation Center of the SPCA of Monterey County—the only organization that rescues and rehabilitates our area's injured and rescued wildlife, most of which are victims of human inattention. We are a non-profit, all-volunteer organization dedicated to preserving our local wildlife and habitat, and preventing the suffering of wild animals through education.

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Animal Rescue ext. 0
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A flimsy chicken wire cage is easily pulled apart by many wild scavengers. Young animals such as puppies and kittens are especially vulnerable to predation and should be kept indoors. Raccoons can carry both the feline and canine distemper virus, as well as rabies, so be sure that your veterinarian vaccinates all your cars and dogs against these diseases.

Outdoor rabbit cages should be kept high off the ground away from trees and other objects that could provide access. Cages should be double-bottomed; a raccoon can injure or kill a rabbit by grabbing and pulling it right through a wire enclosure. All cages should have a separate, completely enclosed nestbox with a solid bottom. Better yet, call The SPCA for information on how to keep your bunny indoors as a house rabbit. Like a “backyard dog” who lives on a chain, many rabbits living in backyard cages do not receive the level of attention required by a domestic, companion animal.

**Raccoons in the yard**

If raccoons frequent your yard, most likely they are after some type of food source. If you leave pet food outside or your garbage isn’t sealed properly you may be feeding without knowing it. Feed pets inside or pick up dishes immediately after feeding. Use heavy-duty garbage cans with tight-fitting lids, or tie or weigh lids down. Keep cans in an anchored rack or tied to a fence so they can’t be knocked over, or store trash inside until pick-up.

Other yard problems are usually seasonal. Raccoons may roll back your ground cover to get at larval insects, or harvest your crops before you do.

Fencing is the only permanent solution, but may create hazards and barriers in already limited wildlife habitat. An electric fence may be more economical than other fencing. Use one or two strands of galvanized wire along insulator posts around the perimeter of the area, about four and twelve inches above the ground. Connect the wire to a commercial fence charger. The low amperage shock produced is irritating, but causes no physical harm. Plants must not touch wires or the fence will be grounded.

Lights and radio deterrents may keep raccoons away long enough to harvest your crop. You can also sprinkle cayenne pepper on your lawn or place ammonia-soaked rags at intervals around your garden. Some gardeners have had good results by planting squash around the garden perimeter and draping it upwards on poles. Raccoons don’t like walking on the prickly plants with their sensitive paws.

Water sources such as fountains and ponds are a natural raccoon attractant, and may not be practical in drought areas. Besides fencing, you can try to protect a pond by submerging wire mesh in the water horizontally around the circumference of the pond. Stretch the mesh, leaving the inside free. Fish then have the center of the pond open and raccoons can’t reach over the wire. Since the mesh is unstable, raccoons usually won’t stand on it.

**What not to do**

- Trapping or moving raccoons is illegal without a permit and simply does not solve the problem. Concentrate on removing the attraction, not the animal. There will always be another animal waiting to move in unless you take care of the problem or use deterrents. Trapped adults may leave behind young to die of starvation in an inaccessible space in your house, causing even bigger problems as their bodies decay and the odor invades your home.

- Never attempt direct contact with wildlife. Animals must leave their resting places to hunt for food. The lasting solution is simply to wait until the animal leaves, and then perform the structural repairs to prevent reentry. There is rarely, if ever, a reason to trap or encounter a wild animal.

- Keep in mind that most “pest control services” are not humane enterprises. Often the animals involved end up being killed. Rarely does any “quick fix” permanently solve a wildlife problem. Call The SPCA— they can provide advice free of charge.

- Never move young from a nest—it is very difficult to reunite them with the parent, who is their best hope for survival. If you suspect that a wild mother is not returning to care for her young, or if you’re worried about any wild animal, take no action yourself—call SPCA Wildlife Rescue at 373-2631 or 422-4721, ext. 0.

- Do not use poisons. They are inhumane and can result in the secondary poisoning of raptors and other wild scavengers. Poisons kill indiscriminately—including neighborhood pets—and remain in the food web for long periods of time.

**When to call The SPCA**

- If you cannot evict wild tenants even after diligent use of the above tactics, or if you have a unique situation, call the SPCA Wildlife Center for humane advice: 373-2631 or 422-4721, ext. 227.

- If you see a raccoon who shows signs of illness such as disorientation, malnutrition, discharge from nose and eyes or wandering in broad daylight, please call SPCA Wildlife Rescue immediately as the animal may be suffering from distemper.