



SKEDADDLE HUMANE WILDLIFE CONTROL

The delights of country living

(until the wildlife moves in with you)

by Pam Hickman

WHEN MY FAMILY and I moved to our 250-plus-year-old home in Nova Scotia's Annapolis Valley nearly 25 years ago, I was excited about living in a rural setting where wildlife abounds. Part of the attraction was the five and a half acres that came with it. The variety of natural habitats included a marsh, field and a wooded ravine. We speculated about local species we might attract and soon my husband was designing large ponds to enhance the wildlife potential of our land.

Little did we realize that, even as we planned to improve the natural environment around us, some of our wild neighbours had their eyes on our home.

As time went on, we became more familiar with the local wildlife. In fact, many of them felt right at home in our home. And who could blame them, really? There appeared to be unlimited access into the warm and cosy confines of our loft, crawl space, attic, and walls. The assortment of creatures that

took advantage of our lodgings was impressive. We're the live-trap kind of people so there are no bodies buried in the yard, but we've evicted a number of uninvited guests. Some were rather noisy neighbours, some destructive, and a few just stunk the place out. They had to go. Some even tried to literally eat us out of house and home. (OK, we did kill those ones.)

Since we were doing a series of small renovations anyway, we aimed to eliminate access points to the interior in an effort to draw the proverbial line between the indoors and outdoors. Unfortunately, even the smallest hole appears like an open barn door to creatures whose survival depends on finding winter shelter and a safe place to bear young. Some animals are exceptional opportunists and have learned to thrive near humans. Our success in discouraging them was pretty limited. Often we were completely unaware of hidden entryways that were rapidly turning into

highways in the night.

When we moved in, the house was attached by a mudroom to a partially renovated barn. Half of the barn structure had recently housed goats and retained its dirt floor and bare board walls. Eventually, we dug down, poured a bed of gravel and laid down sleepers which became the floor joists for a workshop above. About a year later we noticed that the floor of the workshop was sagging in a couple of places. Then we noticed noise coming from the very small space below. This wasn't a little mouse-scurrying noise; this was bigger. Several questions came to mind including who was there and how did they get in? It turned out that some rocks in the barn's foundation had come loose under the deck and some four-legged neighbours had moved right in.

I called Merv, our local wildlife removal expert and former bank manager. He brought his wire live-traps and set out to catch the raccoons that



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Raccoons, like squirrels, seem irresistibly drawn to the free food on offer at the bird feeder.

were busy doing their own renovations under our floor. Five raccoons later, Merv was done and we were poised to plug up the hole—the next day when we had time. Big mistake.

In the morning when we went into the mudroom we immediately noticed a virtual calling card from our newest arrivals. There was no mistaking the eau de skunk in the air. It wasn't a full-on spray smell, but definitely unwelcome. Another call to Merv. This time he brought a low, solid wood, box-like trap. He explained that the solid walls calmed the skunk and the trap's low height prevented it from lifting its tail and spraying when he picked



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There is no mistaking when you have skunks in the house—even after they're gone their odiferous calling card lingers.

up the trap. The skunks were a bit less co-operative and it took over a week to finally catch them. During that time, the odour in the mudroom lingered.

An interesting thing about human sense of smell is that it gets "tired" of smelling the same thing and eventually stops notifying our brain about a particular odour. We got used to it, but others definitely noticed the stink. As we entered the classroom for our parent-teacher interview, the teacher sniffed the air and remarked, "There it is again. We've smelled a faint skunk smell all week and can't figure out where it's coming from." I looked at my husband and laughed. "It's us," I confessed. The teacher assumed I was joking. "No, really." Our jackets hung in the mudroom and had picked up the scent. My daughters' coats had infused the school halls with skunk overtones. We had a good laugh: the kids not so much.

There is no ignoring some intruders. One morning we awoke to a loud metallic banging. In the spring, it's not unusual for a woodpecker to use a downspout to broadcast its presence to potential mates or rivals. In our case, however, the noise was definitely coming from inside the house. It turned out that a hairy woodpecker was part way down our



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Some wildlife guests can be very destructive, chewing and digging holes to gain access to a cosy new home.

central chimney hammering away on the inside of the liner. The incredible sound reverberated throughout the house. This was not a job for Merv; I called Roy, the local chimney sweep.

When you've been at a job long enough you've seen a lot of things. Roy didn't seem surprised or concerned about the situation. He simply assembled his equipment, carefully inserted it into the woodstove, and slowly pushed it skyward. The woodpecker got a gentle elevator ride to the top and flew off a bit sootier, but perfectly safe.

Other noises were not so easily identified or remedied. While my husband was away for work one week, I noticed a crackling-type noise near the sofa while I was watching television. It sounded as if a bit of crinkly plastic wrap had fallen down the heating vent and was vibrating when the furnace came on. I looked down the vent but couldn't see anything. The faint noise persisted all week. When my husband came home



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STUDIO CAFÉ'S CHICKEN STIR-FRY

You can never go wrong with a stir-fry. They are packed with protein and vegetables and make great leftovers. Double-up on the stir-fry sauce and keep in the fridge for later use. Compliments of Chicken Farmers of Ontario. Serves: 6.

Ingredients:

- 6 boneless, skinless chicken breasts cut into 1/4" strips
- 1/2 cup (125 mL) olive oil
- 1 tbsp (15 mL) garlic, chopped
- salt and pepper, to taste
- 6-8 cups (1.5 L) any combination of stir fry vegetables

Stir-Fry Sauce:

- 1 1/2 cups (375 mL) hoisin sauce
- 1/2 cup (125 mL) soy sauce
- 1/2 cup (125 mL) sake or rice wine vinegar
- 1 1/2 cups (375 mL) pineapple juice
- 1/2 cup (125 mL) honey
- 1 cup (250 mL) water
- 1 tbsp (15 mL) fresh ginger, chopped
- 1 tbsp (15 mL) fresh garlic, chopped
- 1 tsp (5 mL) red chili flakes
- 1/4 cup (60 mL) fresh coriander leaves, chopped

1. Make a marinade by combining half the olive oil with the garlic. Add chicken strips and stir to coat. Refrigerate for at least two hours before cooking.
2. In a saucepan, combine all of the stir fry sauce ingredients except the coriander leaves. Bring to a boil and simmer for 15 minutes. Strain and add coriander. Set aside. This sauce may be prepared in advance and will keep in the refrigerator for up to one week.
3. In a large skillet or wok, heat the remaining 1/4 cup of olive oil. Add marinated chicken strips, season with salt and pepper. Cook until almost done. Add vegetables, beginning with those requiring the longest cooking time. Add stir-fry sauce and simmer until vegetables are just cooked.
4. Serve with Oriental noodles, tossed with chopped coriander leaves, salt and pepper. Sprinkle stir-fry with toasted sesame seeds and garnish with whole coriander leaves.



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Home & cottage: country living

he noticed the sound right away and I explained that I'd been unable to find the source. Alarm crept over his face and he rushed to the workshop and returned with a hammer and crowbar. Now it was my turn to be alarmed.

He proceeded to rip the inside trim off the window on the end wall of the house, beside the sofa. The next scene could have come from a horror movie. Carpenter ants came swarming out of the wall. I ran for the vacuum. It wasn't long before the vacuum bag was full and the ants started to crawl up my arms. They bite. Next was the shop vac. Eventually, between the vacuuming, stomping and spraying of insecticide, we managed to quell the onslaught.

Our old house was built with three-inch, solid board walls. The ants had managed to eat their way through more than two inches of solid oak without us even knowing they were there. Another call, this time to Aaron and Greg, local carpenters who replaced the wall. It is essential to check for further damage all around the original source before closing up the walls. We spread carpenter ant-killing powder inside the wall and at the base outside, before finishing it off. We're also careful to keep an eye on any potential sources of destructive ants, such as dead or decaying trees nearby.

Our home offices occupy the downstairs of what used to be the barn. It is quite common to hear the sound of foot races going on in the open loft above. I'm not sure if the red squirrels are challenging the mice or just each other. They seem to co-exist happily, and we co-exist with them, a bit less happily. Any storage above is in critter-proof containers and there's no wiring to cause problems. Rodents can be a fire hazard if chewing on wiring and shouldn't be ignored. Having consulted with several carpenters, it appears to be impossible to keep them out of the loft without essentially rebuilding the barn at vast expense. That's not really an option so we live-trap what we can, but there are always more.



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We must be a puzzle to the wildlife. We spend hundreds of dollars a year on seed and suet to entice our feathered friends, only to complain about the others that come. It's called birdseed but it attracts much more than birds. Many late winter and early spring nights I've spied a fat raccoon or two pawing at the ground under the birdfeeder in the front garden, scooping up seeds and stuffing them into their mouths. The squirrels, too, are irresistibly drawn to the free food and it's a constant battle of wits to out-manoeuvre them.

Quite by accident I discovered the direct correlation between pesky squirrels and birdseed. When our family took a temporary posting overseas, we rented out our house to a young couple. They looked after our two cats, but didn't continue to feed the birds so our house dropped off the flight list. When we returned home three winters later, there was not a squirrel to be seen. It took months before they came back but I'm not willing to give up feeding the birds so we live with the consequences.

As for the ubiquitous mice, I am not a fan. That's partly why we have two cats. Although we choose not to use traditional snap traps, I'm not



PAM HICKMAN

Left: Carpenter ants can eat their way through wood surprisingly quickly. Above: Watch out if raccoons find a way into your garage and, subsequently, your vehicle.

above cheering for my cat if she snags a mouse. These days, however, the cats are so old that they don't see or hear them, but I do. Live-trapping mice seems ridiculous to many of our friends, but that is what we do. Over the years my husband has been seen in his bathrobe driving across the local dike land, taking a little plastic box out of the passenger seat and wishing a scared, but living, mouse good luck on its travels. Water seems to be the barrier between a mouse returning and finding a new home. That's our theory, anyway. Regardless of how many we pack off, there are more in their stead. The most common ones are the deer mice. They generally stay out of view and out of the kitchen, which I appreciate. I find occasional stores of seeds here and there but I'm learning to accept that. I visit the dirt floor basement as infrequently as possible.

Rural life sure has its ups and downs. We do what we can, within reason, to discourage wild invaders and accept that there will always be a few squatters. On the bright side, the deer, fox, ducks, frogs, muskrat, and mink have stayed in the yard and out of the house. Knock on wood. 🐱

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