



EarthWatch Rhode Island



Topic: Animal-Proofing Your Home

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As spring approaches, animal-proofing your home should be at the top of your home fix-up chores. Many animals are looking for food and shelter and places to den. Often, the easiest place for them to settle may well be your home or yard. While people enjoy viewing wildlife, living in close proximity often has serious consequences. Some animals, like squirrels, are tenacious in their habits and can cause fire hazards if wires are chewed in attics. Some, like raccoons, skunks, and woodchucks, are now the major carriers of the rabies strain which has increased considerably in the Northeast.

The Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management receives thousands (6,143 in 2006) of calls each year about wild animals in and around residences. (Coyotes, foxes, fishers, skunks, deer and raccoons generate the most calls). The Department encourages property owners to spend some extra time and effort now that could save thousands of dollars later, as some species can cause extensive property damage and harm people and pets.

Animal-proofing your house and grounds can be fairly simple, and a matter of common sense. It is difficult to break an animal's behavior or movement pattern, so it is important to take action at the first sign of a problem, and even better, to animal-proof your home before the first sign of visitors looking for a new place to live. Animal proofing techniques include:

- Trim overhanging limbs - If any overhang the house, trim them back. Overhanging tree limbs are a major pathway for squirrels and raccoons to reach attics and chimneys, favorite nesting places for both species.
- Check chimneys, attic vents, and the structure itself. If your chimney is not capped, screen it with one-half inch mesh hardware cloth, or cover it with a commercial cap. Replace any loose or rotting boards on your house which might provide an entranceway. Replace old brittle screening in attic louvers
- Block small holes - In general, all holes and openings larger than one-quarter inch should be blocked or screened with building materials resistant to gnawing or prying, such as galvanized sheet metal. If you find an



A chimney cap can protect your home from unwelcome wildlife, especially squirrels.

existing hole, extend a metal patch six inches beyond it in all directions to prevent squirrels from gnawing around the patch. Seal all weak spots or potential entrances.

- Check for gaps around window air conditioners and chimneys - Some bats, for instance, can enter cracks as small as three-eighths of an inch.
- Look for Denning Sites - Look for areas appealing to skunks and raccoons. Skunks like denning sites such as wood piles, rock piles, elevated sheds, openings under concrete slabs and porches, and crawl spaces under houses. Raccoons will nest in storm sewers, crawl spaces, and brush piles, as well as in attics, chimneys, and tree cavities.
- Close up low openings in buildings – The openings should be closed up with boards or screening that extends eight to ten inches underground. Openings under concrete structures should be backfilled with dirt. Debris piles should be removed or stacked neatly to eliminate cavities. Remove undergrowth and grass cover used by woodchucks by mowing around buildings. Use mortar to patch cracks in concrete and masonry.
- Secure garbage - A major attraction for wildlife is unsecured garbage. Raccoons are very strong and patient and will get into any type of garbage can that is not securely latched or placed in a building. They will move a cinder block off the top of a can, and they will definitely open plastic garbage cans which are left outside. If you cannot store your garbage cans inside a garage or shed, use metal cans, and secure the lids with locks, straps, or tie-downs. Freeze aromatic garbage until day of pick up, especially in summer. Sprinkle ammonia on rags and place in garbage cans. Never leave moth balls on the ground.
- Keep pet foods indoors – Feeding pets outside is a major attraction for wildlife.
- Do not feed wildlife and remove bird feeders if necessary. Tossing things like bread, popcorn, nuts and crackers outside to feed birds or squirrels can become an attraction for other unwanted wildlife.
- Plant shrubs and flowers that are less desirable than others as a food source (ie. substitute daffodils for tulips, hardy astible or lamb's ear instead of hostas, boxwood or American Holly for yews, and white spruce in place of fraiser fir); use repellents to protect established plantings, especially if deer are present. Place sturdy fencing or netting in fall, prior to the height of peak damage in winter.



Secure lids on trash cans are a major deterrent for hungry wildlife.

The Department's Division of Fish and Wildlife fields nuisance calls and offers technical assistance to homeowners, *but does not remove wildlife from people's property*. Property owners can try the techniques the Department recommends, but in situations where capture and removal of nuisance animals is necessary, they would have to hire a Nuisance Wildlife Control Specialist (NWCS). Nuisance Wildlife Control Specialists are professionals licensed by the DEM, who for a fee provide wildlife control services and are experienced in species identification, capture, handling, exclusion, regulations, and humane, legal euthanasia techniques. A list of licensed NWCS is available from the Division of Fish and Wildlife.

The Department's Division of Law Enforcement fields nuisance calls and responds to emergency situations involving *visibly sick, injured or aggressive target species, if an Environmental Police Officer is available*. Target species are those considered prone rabies, such as raccoons, woodchucks, skunks, and in some cases, coyotes. *Again, DEM does not routinely remove wildlife from people's property*. Local animal control officers also respond to emergency situations, but, again, do not remove wildlife from people's property routinely.

It is also important to note that capturing a wild animal in your backyard or elsewhere and releasing it in another location is prohibited in Rhode Island. Most often this will not solve the problem and there is a risk of introducing diseases into uninfected populations or to humans.

For further information, Channel 10 viewers can contact DEM's Division of Fish and Wildlife at (401) 789-0281, or download information from DEM's website at www.dem.ri.gov and click on [fact sheets](#) under [publications](#). The BatGuys website - www.bagguys.com - also has extensive information and photos about nuisance species, removal and services.

Interviews:

- Lori Gibson, Supervising Wildlife Biologist, DEM Division of Fish and Wildlife, talked about the importance of wildlife proofing your home, rabies.
- Charlie Brown, Principle Wildlife Biologist, DEM Division of Fish and Wildlife, discussed coyotes, NWCS's and translocation issues.
- Matthew Grady, BatGuys, (a certified Nuisance Wildlife Control Specialist) demonstrated techniques to wildlife proof the home and talked about his experiences with homeowners who have had problems with wildlife.



From left to right, Matthew Gray, Charlie Brown and Lori Gibson prepare to be interviewed by Channel 10.