



Solving Issues with Backyard Wildlife



Many wildlife species have become successful at coexisting with humans and often thrive in urban and suburban environments. These species can take advantage of abundant food resources, available shelter needed for resting and rearing of young, and a lack of natural predators. Some species may even occur in higher numbers and densities in suburban and urban environments than in natural environments. Gray squirrels, striped skunks, raccoons, opossums, red and gray foxes, and coyotes are familiar, or are becoming familiar, sights to many Rhode Islanders. These species commonly occur, and thrive in most suburban neighborhoods.

Their presence and activities may often go unnoticed, and except for the occasional hole in the lawn created by a skunk searching for grubs, or the squirrels raiding the bird feeder, most people do not have a problem sharing their backyards with wildlife. There are times however, when the abundance and adaptability of some animals leads to conflicts with humans which may include damage to homes and other property, the loss of domestic pets, livestock or crops, and the potential transmission of diseases.

The RIDEM's Divisions of Fish and Wildlife and Environmental Police receive numerous calls each year from residents concerned by an interaction with a wild animal. Most of these problems are minor and are often resolved by providing advice to people over the telephone or email or by directing them to information on the RIDEM website. Frequently, the property owner can, with the proper advice and information, resolve the situation themselves using non-lethal methods.



Most wildlife problems are related to two factors: food and shelter. People may not always immediately recognize potential food sources or den sites. Identifying and then eliminating or preventing access to these will often resolve the issue. Pet food dishes, compost piles, garbage, fruit trees, and bird feeders all can provide an easy meal for some wild animal. Sheds elevated on blocks, decks and porches, wood and debris piles all offer potential shelter to a variety of animals.

Some common backyard sources of food for wildlife include:

Dog and cat food dishes. Do not feed pets outdoors. If you must, immediately remove food dishes when pets are finished eating.

Bird feeders. Many animals such as squirrels, skunks, opossums, raccoons, and deer enjoy a meal of protein and fat-rich bird seed.

Compost piles. Do not add meat scraps, grease or other items that might entice wild animals.

Unsecured garbage. Make all household garbage inaccessible to wildlife.

Fruit trees and vines. When in season, many animals including squirrels, raccoons, opossums, skunks, coyotes, foxes, and deer will utilize apples, pears, peaches, grapes and other fruits found in the home garden.

Intentional feeding. Intentionally feeding wild animals can often lead to unintended problems for the person feeding the wildlife and their neighbors. The feeding of deer, coyotes and waterfowl is prohibited by regulation.

Never intentionally feed coyotes, foxes, or other mammals. Animals receiving food will alter their activity patterns and their behavior towards people may change, often becoming brazen. This usually leads to an increased number of sightings and interactions, and can endanger the wildlife by drawing them to an area where they are more likely to be hit by a car or trapped and killed. Each year the RIDEM traces a number of complaints associated with wildlife to intentional feeding situations.

Laws and Regulations

In Rhode Island, state law (RIGL 20-16-2) allows a property owner to kill, by legal means, any furbearer (as defined in RIGL 20-16-1) that is killing or attempting to kill any livestock or domestic animals, destroying crops, creating a health hazard, or causing economic damage to their property. However, the law does not allow for the random taking of wildlife, for the taking of furbearers for their pelts outside the open season, or for killing of animals outside the boundaries of the property of the person with the problem. Also, it does not allow for unlawful methods of take such as poisons, snares, foothold traps, or discharge of firearms in violation of state or local ordinances. The law states that animals taken must be reported to RIDEM within 24 hours.

RIDEM does not recommend that property owners attempt to live-trap nuisance furbearers unless they are prepared and willing to euthanize the offending animal. **State regulations prohibit the live capture and translocation of furbearers.** Captured furbearers can only legally be released on the property on which they were captured. For more information see *Relocating Wild Animals is Against the Law* on the RIDEM website www.dem.ri.gov.



Photo courtesy of C. Allin

Nuisance Wildlife Control Specialists (NWCS)

The RIDEM does not remove or relocate nuisance wildlife. Many homeowners do not have the appropriate equipment, training, or time to resolve wildlife-related problems themselves. Also, persons without the necessary training, knowledge, or skill may be at risk of exposure to a variety of wildlife diseases. In situations where capture and removal of nuisance animals is the desire of the property owner, or necessary to resolve the problem, they will most likely be referred to a Nuisance Wildlife Control Specialist (NWCS). Nuisance Wildlife Control Specialists are professionals licensed by the RIDEM who, for a fee, provide wildlife control services to the general public. Wildlife control services are defined as: “to harass, repel, evict, exclude, capture, possess, transport, liberate, destroy; or attempt to harass, repel, evict, exclude, capture, possess, transport, liberate, destroy a problem wild animal. This is to include the disturbance, removal, or destruction of nests, dens, lodges, or burrows.”

NWCSs are not RIDEM employees; their activities however are highly regulated by the RIDEM. A NWCS must pass an examination administered by the state which assesses their knowledge of laws, regulations, animal life history, wildlife diseases, humane handling and capture, and other relevant topics. NWCS are required to maintain and submit to the RIDEM records of their activities and are required to renew their license on an annual basis. No person may conduct wildlife control services, with or without an associated fee, on the property of another, without first obtaining a NWCS permit.

If you are considering contacting a NWCS to help you with your problem, there are few things you should

consider and discuss with the NWCS before any action is taken:

What is the nature of the problem? Describe what you have seen or heard. You (maybe with the help of the RIDEM or NWCS) will need to identify what animal species is causing the problem. Also, the type of damage and its extent, how long the problem has been occurring, how many animals may be involved, how are they getting in, *etc.*

What methods will be used to solve the problem? Often trapping and removing an animal is only a short-term solution and may not always be necessary. Long-term solutions likely involve exclusion techniques and removal of attractants such as food sources (i.e. “wildlife proofing”). Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of different methods.

What will it cost? You should establish ahead of time what the fee or rate of payment will be. Fees will likely vary between individual NWCS. Keep in mind that fees often must cover the cost of travel, setup, checking traps, insurance, and disposition of animals. The RIDEM does not regulate fees charged by NWCS.

Other considerations? What if you discover that a female raccoon has had her young in the chimney or several female little brown bats have had their young in the attic? These situations are often the most difficult for everyone involved. Maternal dens and roosts are only used for brief periods of time, until the young are capable of moving or flying on their own. Disturbing maternal dens and roosts may cause the mothers to abandon their young, creating orphans that may or may not be candidates for rehabilitation. Discuss with the NWCS other options, such as waiting until the occupants have left on their own, then sealing off entrances to prevent problems in the future.

You can obtain a list of licensed NWCS on the RIDEM website, or by contacting the Division of Fish and Wildlife at (401) 789-0281, or by emailing DEM.DFW@dem.ri.gov. NWCS are private individuals conducting a private service. The RIDEM is not liable for their actions. If you feel that a NWCS has acted in an illegal or unethical matter you should report it to the RIDEM’s Division of Fish and Wildlife. Other wildlife information available from the Department of Environmental Management website www.dem.ri.gov/wildlife or at Division of Fish and Wildlife offices:

- ***American Black Bear*** (*Ursus americanus*)
- ***Bats of Rhode Island***
- ***Eastern Coyotes*** (*Canis latrans*)
- ***Fishers*** (*Martes pennanti*)
- ***Gray Foxes and Red Foxes***
- ***Virginia Opossum*** (*Didelphis virginiana*)
- ***Raccoons*** (*Procyon lotor*)
- ***Striped Skunks*** (*Mephitis mephitis*)
- ***Squirrels and Allies*** (*Sciuridae spp.*)
- ***White-tailed deer*** (*Odocoileus virginianus*)
- ***Woodchucks*** (*Marmota monax*)
- ***Native Snakes of Rhode Island***
- ***Turtles of Rhode Island***
- ***Mute swans***
- ***How to Animal Proof Your Home***
- ***Reducing Deer Damage***
- ***Dealing with Resident Canada Geese***
- ***Relocating Wild Animals is Against the Law***
- ***Becoming a Nuisance Wildlife Control Specialist***