

Natural South Marysburgh

Learning to Live with Wildlife

A six-week Backyard Naturalization course that I taught for several years devoted one entire session on attracting wildlife to our backyards. It is, after all, a prime reason why we naturalize our properties, in the hope that we will eventually start attracting some wildlife to our backyards to complete the setting.

We also covered what methods of dissuasion to consider when our well-meaning efforts caused wildlife to respond too enthusiastically, resulting in an overabundance of a given species. We learned about the four basic requirements of wildlife habitat—water, food, shelter and space. It became crystal clear that live trapping, or more lethal means, simply did not work for the simple reason that

wildlife is dynamic, and never sedentary; it is always moving around and seeking out real estate that is not yet occupied by another member of its species. It is the law of nature. Try trapping squirrels and see how far you get. They just keep coming! Since our bumbling efforts at animal control have never worked, instead we need to operate within their system by simply removing one or more of those four components that serve to attract wildlife—either food or water, or living space or shelter (where they nest and raise young). Remove any one or more of those components, and you begin to achieve success. It is something I learned back in Grade six from a teacher who was well ahead of her time, and I have to wonder why the concept seems to be known by only a few.

It seems unbelievable, but there are still property owners who employ the use of poisons to achieve what they perceive to be success. This not only puts unintended targets, like family pets and scavengers at risk, but fails to achieve its purported goal. Using poisons like antifreeze constitutes cruelty to animals. It's a slow, incredibly painful death. The major cause of toxicity is not so much the ethylene glycol itself but its [metab-](#)



- Photo by Peter Sporning

[olites](#), these being [glycolic acid](#) and [oxalic acid](#).

I am always reminded of the Belleville resident who brusquely asked City Council when they were going to do something about the raccoons and skunks in his community as they were getting into his curbside garbage bags at night! The poor fool was quite unable to see beyond his stupidity, and continued to leave his garbage out at night where roving nocturnal creatures could enjoy a feast. The resident expected some other segment of society to take care of a problem that he created himself. Meanwhile he was transporting trapped animals to someone else's property almost daily while he blithely continued to attract them! And we are the intelligent creature!

There always has been a perception that wildlife is the enemy and it must all be eliminated. This is fueled by old wives tales about fishers pounding down cabin doors, bats seeking out the long hair of women, and porcupines shooting quills. We are a very gullible species if we believe such drivel.

The secret to animal control is working within their system to dissuade any so-called unwanted animals. Nothing in backyards needs to be shot, or poisoned with antifreeze, or tortured. The concept has worked well for me at my home for almost 50 years and I continue to enjoy a manageable population of wildlife that includes squirrels, raccoons, skunks, and cottontail rabbits, all of whom have created no issues in my backyard.

For me, they are entertainment, and the reason they cause no problems is something called responsibility, a word that is no longer as fashionable as it was in earlier times. Responsible by ensuring cavities are sealed to prevent raccoons from nesting, garbage is placed at the roadside in the morning after nocturnal animals have retired, feeders are designed to thwart the efforts of squirrels, small holes are covered to prevent starlings from nesting and barbeque areas are kept clean to prevent visits from coyotes. Responsibility is an abominable word that causes some of us to tremble with fear, but it does work. I still have the occasional raccoon, skunk, fisher and coyote pass by, but only in numbers that I feel are acceptable. I enjoy their presence, and I will know when the time comes to step up my control methods by manipulating those four elements that attract them. It's wildlife management that actually works, and has worked for millennia for those who choose to listen. And you don't need to buy a jug of antifreeze, or feed them dark chocolate or pine oil to get results.

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