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Not Under My Back Porch

“Vacant: desirable attic residence, perfect for family of small animals. Plenty of wood, wires and insulation to chew on. Convenient entrance through roof vent. Available in time for winter.”

By Antonia Morton

Working in her third-floor home office in early fall, Lynne Baird was startled to hear what sounded like crowbars being used in the attic space just over her head. The crunching, ripping noises were accompanied by the frenzied skittering of clawed feet on bare boards.

When she called a wildlife control company, the culprit turned out to be squirrels. “It’s hard to believe that creatures so small can make so much noise,” recalls Ms. Baird. “Squirrels like to chew on wood, and it sounded like they were tearing the roof apart with their teeth!”

Ms. Baird’s cedar house, north of Carlingwood, backs onto a ravine. “We have all these big trees, and we see our share of squirrels – we love watching them eat birdseed,” she admits. But though squirrels frisking around outside are cute, whereas squirrels snacking on joists and floorboards are annoying – and expensive.

With the onset of cool weather, many small forms of wildlife that live in urban areas – animals ranging from mice and bats, to squirrels, raccoons and skunks – get the urge to find a nice cozy spot to spend the winter. And if householders aren’t careful, that winter home could easily be their inadvertently accessible attic, porch, crawlspace or chimney.

What’s wrong with having an animal in your house? Plenty, says Marc Chubb of AAA Wildlife Control, which came to Ms. Baird’s aid. His company fields plenty of calls year-round (especially in spring nesting season, the busiest time for him) from people

who suddenly find they're sharing living quarters with uninvited guests. "We love our green space in Ottawa, we love nature – except when it's in our house!" he acknowledges.

"A lot of animals, such as raccoons and squirrels, don't really hibernate – they just go into a kind of torpor," he explains. "The only true hibernators are bats. Skunks, for example, don't sleep the way bears do, for the whole winter. That's why they can be a real problem. They'll go under somebody's porch and snooze; then wake up a few weeks later all groggy, realize they're snowed in, panic and spray."

Regardless of season, the problems of animal infestation can be dire. Bats can be carriers of rabies, which is fatal to humans if not treated. Raccoons can carry rabies too, and their droppings can also carry a disease-causing spore. Mouse droppings can harbour deadly hantoviruses.

Fortunately, those worst-case scenarios are rare. A more common event is when an animal gets trapped in the house and dies. Householders can't remove the little corpse without tearing walls apart, so they just have to live with the atmosphere until it dissipates. (That happened to Ms. Baird once, out in the country. "The smell was awful, and it took weeks to clear," she recalls with a shudder.)

Droppings and waste cause unpleasant odours too; the noise of animal movement is distracting; and if nuisance animals like their new home well enough, they may expand into the rest of the house. Nobody wants bats flitting through bedrooms, mice making themselves at home in kitchen cupboards, or a mother raccoon raising a litter in the chimney.

Squirrels, though, are by far the most destructive critters. "Because they're rodents, their teeth are continually growing, and they have to grind them down," says Mr. Chubb. "They don't just gnaw on wood; they can destroy insulation as well, because they keep running around in it and re-arranging it. The main problem is that they chew on electrical wires, which can be a real fire hazard."

Fortunately, Ms. Baird discovered her squirrel problem before it was too far advanced – "They didn't chew through any wires, my computer still works!" In her case, the squirrels really had to exert themselves to get into the house. "We walked around outside, and you could see where they'd chewed away the wooden siding," she says. "Marc told us that because it's cedar, they can always chew their way in again; so we're looking at alternatives for the exterior."

Those squirrels were unusually determined: most of their wild brethren seek an easier entrance. A home typically has a number of weak points, says Mr. Chubb, such as roof vents, plumbing vents, stove vents, wall vents, under porches or additions, and in garages. Loose or incorrectly installed soffit and fascia is an open invitation; and chimneys, if not properly capped, are like a highway into your home.

"If builders always built houses properly, I'd be out of business!" he admits wryly. "They always have the opportunity to build an animal-proof house. When people buy a home, they should have an animal expert come out, just like a building expert, and identify any problem areas."

Sadly, though, most people don't think about wildlife-proofing until there's an emergency – as Donna Dubreuil is all too aware. She and her husband founded the Ottawa-Carleton Wildlife Centre back in 1987, with the double mandate of educating people about urban wildlife and rehabilitating rescued animals and orphans.

"We get about 5,000 wildlife-related calls a year – all Ottawa municipalities refer wildlife situations to us," she says. "Right now, we're averaging 70 calls a day. This year is very atypical in terms of the numbers of animals. Last year, for instance, we had calls about 90 baby squirrels. This year, we've had over 200."

More animal activist than removal expert, Ms. Dubreuil is in favour of a live-and-let-live philosophy. "Most people panic and think, Oh my God, I've got a noise in my attic, gotta get it out!" she says. "But we always think in terms of a grace period: eventually, the animals will move away on their own. We never promote removal. And we don't use the term 'nuisance animal,' because it's very presumptuous – we come along, take the animals' habitat, and then conflicts with them become a nuisance to us."

For this reason, "pest exterminators" aren't high on Ms. Dubreuil's list of people to turn to. Most, she says, don't use humane methods: too many trap animals and either dispose of them, or release them elsewhere. Nor do they always address the really important issue of fixing the home so animals can't re-tenant it.

She does, however, have a certain grudging respect for Triple-A. "They're the only company we deal with, though it's very rare we even do that," says Ms. Dubreuil. Mostly this is because Mr. Chubb shares her aversion to mistreating animals. He will only handle animal situations he can deal with humanely; so mice, which have to be exterminated rather than removed, aren't on his list. "I'm not into bloodshed, absolutely not," he stresses.

What homeowners should do, says Ms. Dubreuil, is learn to deal with conflicts in a humane way. "I believe we should educate homeowners so that they can handle problems themselves," she says. "After all, if you have to pay a wildlife company to remove a raccoon, you're not going to like the animals after that!"

That's one point Mr. Chubb and Ms. Dubreuil are united on: prevention is better than cure, both for householder and beast. "Before animals move in, you can secure the house for around \$100," he points out. "But after they move in, it costs considerably more."

Ms. Baird, for instance, is looking at a bill of around \$700 for removing her squirrels and then making sure they can't get back in again. She's not complaining: she was impressed by AAA's professionalism, and its standing offer to redo the work at no charge if the animal manages to get back in.

Still, Ms. Dubreuil is apprehensive for the local animals. "Many people want them out, but they find some company other than AAA that can do the work a little cheaper," she says. "So they go with the lowest price – and often end up relocating the animal, and doing a lot of damage."
