

# Wild in the Woods

## When Wildlife Overstays

by Carol A. Heiser  
illustrations by Spike Knuth

Nature lovers who ordinarily enjoy watching birds and other wildlife visit their yard are sometimes surprised—and perplexed—when they discover that certain animals can become quite a nuisance under the right conditions. This has certainly happened to my own family, which has been feeding birds and squirrels for years. My father would routinely leave peanuts on a table outside the dining room window as an invitation for squirrels, and us kids would sit right next to the glass to see their antics up close. Trouble is, the squirrels got so bold and accustomed to the energy rich snacks that they became disgruntled when we went away one weekend and didn't leave them any food behind. When we returned, we found that the squirrels had chewed away the entire corner of the window!

White-tailed deer have become a common sight within Virginia's suburban settings. Loss of habitat and a deer's endless need to eat has made living in harmony with them a real challenge.



# ays Its Welcome

There are plenty of wildlife species which might be considered “pesky critters” around the home, depending on your point of view. Labeling an animal a “nuisance” is usually a matter of perspective and is often relative to a given situation, like our peanuts-and-squirrels scenario. In many cases, the animals that tend to become a nuisance are opportunists: they take advantage of food and other resources that they happen to stumble upon. They’re not “bad” animals, they’re just able to adapt well to man-made environments in the urban and suburban landscape, and sometimes they get in our way.

What can you do when wildlife comes to call, and you weren’t expecting company? Here are the facts you need to know about the top three species that people complain about the most.

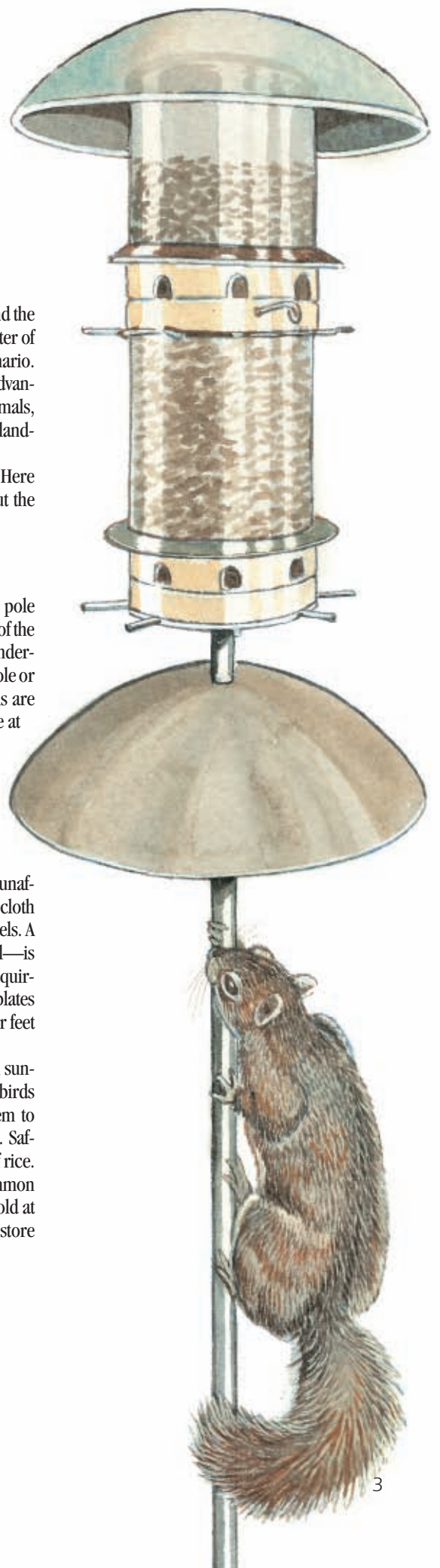
## Squirrels

The best way to keep squirrels off your bird feeders is to hang the feeders on a pole equipped with baffles. Use a large dome-shaped baffle placed above the feeders at the top of the pole, and a cone-shaped or cylindrical baffle made from sheet metal or PVC on the pole underneath the feeders. The baffles should make it more difficult for squirrels to climb up the pole or jump down onto the feeders from above (note the operative word “should”—squirrels are notoriously clever and can often outwit even the best designs!). The pole itself should be at least 10 feet away from trees, and the feeders must be at least 6 feet off the ground.

Another design that’s been known to work is suspending a cable between two trees with the feeder in the middle, and then slide 2-liter soda bottles or other slippery cylinders over the cable on either side of the feeder to make it harder for the squirrel to get across. This assumes that the feeder is not directly beneath some convenient branches, of course. Some feeders have springs in the perches which enable the seed portal or hopper to close when depressed by a heavy squirrel but allow lighter-weight birds to feed unaffected. A feeder enclosed within a wire cage can also work: the plastic-coated hardware cloth or chicken wire has holes big enough to permit birds but small enough to exclude squirrels. A more sophisticated design—and apparently very successful—is a feeder equipped with an electrical shocking device. The squirrel receives a mild shock when its feet touch the electrical plates at top and bottom, but birds are not shocked because their feet can not make the same contacts.

If you’re tired of squirrels gobbling up your income in sunflower seeds, try using only safflower seeds. The same birds you would ordinarily get with sunflower seeds also seem to enjoy the safflower when that is the only food available. Safflower is a white seed that looks like an oversized grain of rice. Chickadees, goldfinches, titmice, finches and other common backyard birds will partake of it. The seed might not be sold at your corner mammoth mart, but it’s usually available at a store which specializes in bird feeders and bird paraphernalia.

If you enjoy feeding birds then you inevitably set the stage for attracting squirrels. Trying to rid your yard of these acrobatic wonders has become a million dollar business and one that has homeowners going nuts over.



As for squirrels in the attic, the easiest thing to do according to one game warden, is to turn on the attic light and put a radio in the room tuned to a continuous talk channel, not music. The constant light and voices day and night disturbs the squirrels to leave, and take their young with them. Do not close up the holes they were using to get in, however, if you suspect any young have been left behind: the adults will simply chew a new hole. Wait until the end of summer and before winter to make the repairs, when you're sure they're gone.

A second method, this one described by a biologist, is to fashion a piece of sheet metal into a funnel/cone shape. On one end is the funnel, whose opening is the same size as the hole in the woodwork. The funnel

extends out about 12 inches, and at the other end is a wide cone, about another 12 to 15 inches long. Attach the funnel end over the hole, making sure the metal is sealed around the edges. Keep an eye on this until you see the squirrels leave. Once they get out, they can not get back in through the cone end.

Finally, a "have-a-heart" trap may work, but only if you get the entire squirrel family and leave no young behind. Then be sure to fix the holes promptly, before other animals find their

way in. Landowners do not need a permit to deal with squirrel problems such as these on their own property.

## Deer

When it comes to deer, the question on everyone's mind invariably seems to be, "what can I plant that deer won't eat?" The general consensus among biologists is that if a deer is hungry enough, it will eat almost any plant, regardless of what kind of plant it is or what kind of repellent you put on it. Whether or not a deer browses a plant depends on many factors, such as palatability of the plant, health and condition of the deer, health and condition of the habitat, density of the deer population in a given geographical area, and so on.

In an often-cited study that was reported by Cornell University's Department of Natural Resources in fall 1992 ("Resistance of Woody Ornamental Plants to Deer Damage"), the researchers found a handful of plants which appeared least likely to be browsed by deer. These included barberry, paper birch, common boxwood, American holly, drooping leucothoe and Japanese pieris. Presumably these



species would be the best choices in a landscape, but there are no guarantees. At the other end of the spectrum, the researchers found that plants like azaleas, apples, plums, arborvitae, yew and hybrid tea rose were highly favored by deer and tended to experience severe damage. Species like red cedar, white pine, deciduous azaleas and forsythia fell within the moderate damage range.

There have also been numerous scientific studies done over the years to measure the effectiveness of various chemical repellents and treatments that are intended to deter deer from sampling your favorite ornamentals. Some people report varying degrees of success using taste repellents, such as hot sauce from the kitchen. Commercial (chemical) repellents might contain similar ingredients, such as the capsaicin found in hot sauce or ammonium soaps. Deer repellents go by optimistic names like Deer Away or Hinder. Unfortunately, chemical repellents must be reapplied after each heavy rain, which makes purchasing the products on a regular basis rather expensive if you're trying to treat a large area. (As with any chemical on the market, always read the label carefully and apply only as directed.)

Other people have had some (temporary) success with odor repellents, such as bars of soap hung from plant limbs in the yard, or bars of soap cut into thumb-sized chunks that can be scattered in your flower beds. Human hair placed in mesh bags and hung 3 feet apart on trees may work but is not known to consistently repel deer.

Home recipes may or may not work, depending on who you talk to. The most interesting of these is one I heard about from a homeowner who says that it works for him: mix a half dozen eggs in 1 gallon of water; put the container in the sun for a week; pour it out in a watering can (hold your nose!); then sprinkle it on your plants. In fact, many of the commercial products sold in stores contain whole egg solids as the active ingredient.



There are a few other options besides repellents. Cover your plants with soft mesh or netting over the winter, for example, to protect the leaf tips from being browsed while still letting sunlight through. You might also consider getting a dog that will chase deer—and most likely anything else that enters the yard.

However, on the advice of our deer biologist, the only reliable way you can make your yard or garden absolutely deer-proof is to install a high-tensile, woven-wire fence that's at least 10 feet tall. An 8-foot fence of special woven fabric helps restrict deer movements but won't keep them out completely. A 6-foot fence is better than nothing, but it will obviously be easier

Before you take drastic steps to evict those pesky squirrels from your feeders, raccoons from your rafters, or confront the bats in your belfry, you might want to read and learn as much as you can about your friend or foe. Learning to humanly outwit and to live with wildlife critters that overstay their welcome may be the best part of being a nature lover.



for deer to jump. A single strand, electric fence baited with peanut butter is often effective: deer are attracted to the peanut butter, receive a mild shock and are frightened away.

## Woodpeckers

If your peaceful morning slumber is shattered by the noise of a woodpecker pounding on your house, there are three possible reasons this might be happening. First, woodpeckers are predominantly insect eaters and are attracted to the wood of dead trees in search of food. Second, woodpeckers make holes in dead trees to build their nests. Third, male woodpeckers try to attract a mate or defend their territory by “drumming” on hollow surfaces such as trees or logs which will carry the sound near and far.

Check your home carefully for evidence of insect presence or damage: carpenter bees, carpenter ants or termites might be ringing the dinner bell for these birds. You may need to treat your home with an insecticide, caulk tunnels, or paint with an exterior latex before repairing woodpecker damage.

If you're sure that insects are not the problem, the best method for discouraging woodpeckers is to install a 1/2-inch mesh, lightweight plastic or nylon netting over the wood-siding beneath the eaves, as soon as damage is apparent. Attach the net with wooden dowels and hooks, angling the net back from the edge of the eave to the siding. Make sure there is at least a 3-inch gap between the wall and the netting to keep the bird from pecking through the mesh. The net must also be secure enough that the bird can not get behind it.

Another way to provide protection is with a metal barrier such as aluminum flashing or metal sheathing. The sheathing can be painted with simulated wood grain for camouflage with the siding. Also, 1/2-inch hardware cloth can be attached directly to the siding or on one-inch spacers to make a gap in between. Spray paint the wire to match the siding.

Occasionally, scare tactics with moving or reflective objects may frighten the birds away, such as reflective mylar tape, strips of aluminum foil, or bright pie pans hung from the eaves. Repeated loud noises may be helpful, as from banging on a garbage can lid. It has been reported that fake owls or snakes are generally ineffective in discouraging woodpeckers.

Because woodpeckers are protected under the federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act, killing or otherwise harming the birds is illegal without a special permit.

## Some General Do's and Don'ts

The best method of protection is prevention. Use the guidelines below to discourage raccoons, skunks, and other furry beasts from frequenting your yard or home.

### DON'T:

- throw kitchen scraps or old bread out in the yard; these items attract starlings, crows and other animals
- feed mammals; avoid putting out apples, corn, etc. that might be attractive to squirrel, deer, raccoon, opossum, etc.
- leave dog food or cat food outside
- feed geese or ducks around ponds

### DO:

- use wire, weights or clamps to tighten trash can lids
- keep outdoor grills clean and free from food, or store in garage
- take your bird feeder down in the summertime to avoid bear problems, if you live in an area with bear
- avoid over-mulching around the foundation of your home
- store firewood piles or yard debris like sticks and leaves away from the house or garage
- keep the compost pile well away from buildings and turn it frequently
- place bat boxes or bird boxes on poles or trees, not directly on your house
- inspect around your home yearly for any holes or crevices that might provide entranceways for mice, bats, snakes, etc., such as under the eaves, around the soffits and window frames, under the panels of siding, around the exterior doorways
- cover the chimney, septic vent pipes and exhaust fan outlets with a hardware wire “cap” or other tightly fitting exclusion device
- seal off all foundation openings with wire mesh, sheet metal or concrete
- install a fence or mesh barrier around the base of a porch or deck if it is open underneath
- maintain a healthy lawn and treat for grubs that might attract moles, skunks and other wildlife

## Who Ya Gonna Call?

Contrary to popular opinion, the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries is not in the business of removing unwanted wildlife

from people's homes or properties. Also, most of the county Animal Control agencies do not offer assistance with wildlife matters either. Instead, they typically focus their efforts on domestic pet problems (although you might double-check to be sure). If you want to trap or remove wildlife from around your home, you must rely on other local resources, volunteers or private businesses to assist you. Look in the yellow pages under “Pest Control Services.” If you intend to kill an unwanted animal yourself, always call your county game warden first to be sure you will be in compliance with state and local laws. The game warden can usually be reached through the county sheriff's office.

If the problem is widespread and involves a large concentration of wildlife or a potential hazard to public health—such as where there are too many geese on a town reservoir, for example, or where a farmer is experiencing serious crop damage—the landowner can contact the Wildlife Services office of the U. S. Department of Agriculture's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (USDA-APHIS). Their Virginia Wildlife Services office can be reached at (804) 739-7739 in Moseley, VA (or visit the agency Web site at [www.aphis.usda.gov/ws/](http://www.aphis.usda.gov/ws/)).

## Learning More...

*Squirrel Wars: Backyard Wildlife Battles and How to Win Them*, by George H. Harrison (c. 2000 Willow Creek Press, Minocqua, Wisconsin), 176 pp..

*Managing White-Tailed Deer in Suburban Environments*, 52 pp. and *Managing Canada Geese in Urban Environments*, 42 pp.—both booklets published by Cornell Cooperative Extension; available through their Web site ([www.cce.cornell.edu/publications/catalog.html](http://www.cce.cornell.edu/publications/catalog.html)), or call (607) 255-2080.

The Berryman Institute for Wildlife Damage Management ([www.berrymaninstitute.org](http://www.berrymaninstitute.org)) — contains excellent links to many related sites.

NC State University, Wildlife Extension Service ([www.ces.ncsu.edu/nreos/wild/wildlife](http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/nreos/wild/wildlife)) — click on “Wildlife Damage Control” to get to a page filled with over 40 fact sheets in pdf-format that were scanned from the University of Nebraska's manual, *Prevention and Control of Wildlife Damage*.

*Carol A. Heiser is a Wildlife Habitat Education Coordinator with the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries.*