



## **Backyard Wildlife: Cute-or Cunning? A Delight to Watch-or a Danger to Your Health?**

Folks who live in urban areas and suburban developments with nearby woodlands and greenspaces often enjoy attracting wildlife to their homes. But they need to be aware of the potential pitfalls of attracting wild animals to the home environment.

Wildlife can infiltrate your home in seemingly staggering numbers. This teeming wildlife can include many species from garden variety veggie-loving slugs and bunny rabbits--to wood-chewing termites and attic-attracted bats and cellar-dwelling skunks that can thrive in your home. The cornucopia of cute--and often conniving--critters that might call your home their own domicile include smaller representatives of the animal world, such as paper wasps, mud wasps, crickets, spiders, butterflies, and fireflies and such yard and pool denizens as garden toads and tree frogs. The larger woodchucks, ground moles, and squirrels, and the even more conspicuous coyotes and beavers may try to join you. Some really big eye-catchers like black bears and white-tailed deer could be on the prowl.

Sometimes these roving adventurers arrive on their own initiative, attracted by your larder of garbage pails full of food waste and the remains of fries and burgers whose discarded remnants make as fast and as easy a meal for the four-footed forager as for the original human purchaser. Your discarded

dinners and scraps are a boon to raccoons and other furry guzzlers.

Refuse isn't always what brings the intruders. Often, animals arrive because folks like to watch creatures and have attracted the "wild woods world" to their yards by planting fruiting and flowering shrubs or by putting out food so they can watch or photograph the zoo zooming around the backyard.

A deer striding majestically through your yard makes a fantastic photo opportunity, and you experience a kind of rapture just watching deer, especially if you see a doe and her fawn.

When a family of raccoons patrols your yard at evening, you feel an integral part of nature as you watch their cute, gamboling antics. If a red fox also makes his rounds to inspect your yard for mice or leftovers in the garbage, you really feel a part of the great wild world.

But, the majestic deer and the pretty doe have a down side. Deer eat your garden and your expensive shrubs. An array of other wild animals also savor your garden goodies, including ravenous rabbits and gnawing groundhogs who grow fat on your green beans while you become irritated at the loss of your garden edibles. Raccoons—

as well as being fun to watch--also overturn garbage cans and leave your lawn looking and smelling like the local dump.

Although they are wild and majestic, wild animals also carry and transmit disease. Deer carry deer ticks; other warm-blooded animals harbor dog ticks; and raccoons, foxes, and other mammals also carry and spread deadly rabies.

West Virginia has more than 50 species of mammals in many sizes from small shrews and jumping mice to elusive weasels, the ubiquitous raccoons and opossums, and the imposing black bear. Many of these animals can visit or live in your yard, and it is possible a woodchuck and its mammal relatives--could, in the vicinity of your home--be doing more than just "chucking wood."

Warm-blooded animals such as raccoons and foxes often are infested with fleas and ticks and even if you have defleaded and deticked your own version of your domestic Fido and Fluffy--your yard could harbor fleas--and disease-causing ticks which could look for a meal on you or your family.

The brown dog tick--found on dogs and other animals--and the deer tick -- carried by white-tailed deer--can both spread disease.

Lyme disease results from the bite of a deer tick. The deer tick is considerably smaller than the dog tick, which is about the size and shape of the letter O. Symptoms of Lyme disease can appear anywhere from days to years after a bite, which make for a difficult diagnosis. Symptoms of Lyme disease can include a red rash near the location of the bite. The rash may spread on the bitten area, and the rash may spread to other parts of the body. The rash may last for a few days or for a month. Other early symptoms include nausea, chills, fatigue, fever, and aching muscles and joints. If left untreated, Lyme

disease can lead to serious health problems including cardiac disorders.

Ticks seem to have been put on the world to make other creepy-crawlies appear appealing. Ticks are repulsive and attach themselves to skin and suck blood. They may suck blood for a day or a week and then drop to the ground and hide in the grass waiting for another victim. Some ticks in the larval (young) stage feed on small animals such as mice or voles and then feed on larger hosts including deer and humans. The larval deer tick is most likely to transmit Lyme disease. Active in the spring and summer, this insidious tick is only the size of a pinhead.

In other words, a profusion of warm-blooded animals may mean a proliferation of ticks.

The best defenses against deer ticks and dog ticks, are: (1) be aware that ticks can be present in your yard or in local parks and woods especially if warm-blooded animals are present, and (2) make yourself tick-proof. Ticks lurk in tall grasses and await a passer-by whose exposed skin offers the best chance of the next meal. It's a good idea to avoid tall grasses during tick season, which is warm weather from spring to fall. If you are roaming in grasses and wooded areas, wear long sleeves and pants for protection. Spray exposed skin with an appropriate insect repellent. Check yourself frequently for ticks and remember that ticks hide in places you can't see, such as the hair on your head.

Warm-blooded animals also harbor rabies, a disease of the nervous system transmitted by the bite of an infected animal. Animals that can transmit deadly rabies include raccoons, skunks, and foxes. Your best defense against rabies is to have your own pets vaccinated and never approach or touch a wild animal, especially if the animal acts sick. Never handle an animal that looks ill. Be especially

wary of an animal you see in daylight which you would normally see active at night. Such a radical change in the animal's habits could mean it has rabies. Skunks and raccoons you see during the day, especially if they walk unsteadily and look sick, probably are sick.

## **BACKYARD WILDLIFE: BY SIZE**

Impressive:

### **Black Bear**

**DESCRIPTION.** Black bears weigh from 140 to 300 pounds, and some goliaths of the black bear world weigh over 600 pounds. Their fur is black but can be tinged with brown.



**Bear**

**HABITAT.** Although the black bear's natural home is forest and wilderness areas, bears are adaptable opportunists. The presence of garbage in dumps, around suburban developments, and at homes and cabins in wooded areas means bears are becoming more and more common around people's homes.

**FOOD.** Bears are basically vegetarians and scroungers. In the wild, they eat fruit, acorns, mushrooms, honey, ants, wood roaches, grapes, and bechnuts. This varied diet means bears can develop an interest in human foods including foods left on picnic tables, food in garbage cans, and whatever can be found at local dumps.



**Bear Cub**

A few drops of soup left in a can are easily devoured by a bear's tongue.

**WHEN TO LOOK.** Bears are active mainly during the night, but they may travel and feed by day, so you could see a bear anytime. Bears are usually solitary--except for a mother bear with her cubs. Cubs may remain with the sow or mother bear for over a year.

**BEAR SIGNS AROUND YOUR HOME.** Overturned garbage cans, bear tracks (bears leave pretty big footprints), and clawed bark around trees could indicate bears.

**REMARKS.** The number of bears in West Virginia is increasing. In the year 2000, hunters legally took a record number more than 1,300. Bears can travel long distances, and an increasing bear population means bears are moving into new territories including residential areas.

### **White-tailed Deer**

**DESCRIPTION.** White-tailed deer weigh 100 to 300 pounds and have large ears and a white tail; males have antlers. A deer's coat is short and tan in summer and long and thick and gray in winter.



**Deer**

**HABITAT.** Fields, farmland, woods, and suburban areas.

**FOOD.** In the wild, deer are herbivores, and eat a variety of twigs and leaves of woody plants such as maple and sumac. They also like acorns, beechnuts, and apples. Deer in farming areas consume corn, alfalfa, and soybeans. Deer also eat garden produce and shrubs around homes.



**Deer**

**WHEN TO LOOK.** Deer are most active at dawn and dusk. Deer are social animals and usually stay together. Adult females (does) spend most of the year with their fawns and yearlings. Bucks form separate bachelor herds. Deer can jump fences 8 feet high, so it's hard to fence out deer.

**DEER SIGNS AROUND YOUR HOME.** Nibbled and eaten shrubbery, deer droppings, and bent grass where deer have rested in the grass.

**REMARKS.** Deer can damage shrubbery around the home, as well as commercial crops including Christmas trees and orchards. Deer can find their way to city streets, become panicked, and even crash through windows. Deer are also a problem on highways and airport runways.

### **Still Pretty Big:**

#### **Coyote**

**DESCRIPTION.** Coyotes vary in size and appearance, but a typical male coyote weighs about 30 pounds, stands 20 inches tall at the shoulder, measures 4 feet from nose to tail-tip, and has long soft fur in mottled shades of gray and brown. Coyotes can weigh up to 50 pounds. Some are black and occasionally mostly white. Coyotes have fluffy, bushy tails.



**Coyote**

**HABITAT.** Habitat and living quarters for a coyote is wherever it is. The adaptable coyote lives in every state except Hawaii. Coyotes bivouac where they want, from suburban garbage dumps to wilderness.

**FOOD.** A coyote's food is whatever it can chew. Coyotes are omnivores--which means that like us, they eat a variety of foods. Coyote chow includes everything from melons to lizards and carrion including bears and skunks. Shoe leather and parts of tires have also been found in coyote's stomachs.

**WHEN TO LOOK.** Anytime. Remember one fact about coyotes--they are adaptable and adopt whatever life style it takes to survive. Coyotes can hunt by day, or night, dine off fresh meat such as your pet or off carrion such as a road-killed deer, eat wild fruits or savor garbage, and hunt in packs like wolves--or the wily coyote can operate as a lone hunter.

**COYOTE SIGNS AROUND YOUR HOME.** Like raccoons, coyotes may raid your garbage cans. Coyotes also make meals of domestic animals including cats and dogs. Pets should never be left alone in areas where coyotes are active, or a pet might become a meal.

**REMARKS.** Coyotes can carry rabies. They also can bite those who try to feed them. Coyotes are on the increase and have even been found near New York City. The spread of coyotes is related to human activities. When Europeans arrived in America, coyotes lived in the western United States. Settlers eliminated the wolf. With this prime predator gone, the adaptable coyote, which unlike the wolf thrives around human settlements, took the wolf's place and by the 1920s coyotes were at home in the East. The coyote's scientific name, *Canis lutrans*, means barking dog. Coyotes are known for their barking and yipping.

## Red Fox

**DESCRIPTION.** Red foxes weigh 8 to 12 pounds. In profile, a red fox is slim and sleek with pointed ears and a long pointed nose. The tail is bushy. Color is rusty red, but red foxes can also be black.



**Fox**

**HABITAT.** Red foxes are at home in farm areas with rolling hills and woods. Red foxes are also at home in suburban areas and have even been found foraging in cities, although their dens may be in nearby rural woods.

**FOOD.** Foxes eat whatever they can get, including mice, rabbits, rats, domestic chickens, game birds, snakes, insects, fruits, nuts, grasses, and garbage and carrion.

**WHEN TO LOOK.** Foxes are primarily active at night, although they do hunt during the day. Foxes are wary and stealthy and may live around your home. You may not even be aware of the fox's presence. Foxes hunt alone except during mating season when the pair hunt together--January to June.

**FOX SIGNS.** It's not always easy to tell if you have foxes, because your missing grapes and scattered garbage could be the work of raccoons and coyotes.



**Fox**

**REMARKS.** Red foxes don't usually present a nagging nuisance to the homeowner, but red foxes often are afflicted with rabies and with such parasites as ticks, lice, and fleas. Therefore, it is not desirable to have large numbers of foxes around the immediate vicinity of your home.

## Beaver

**DESCRIPTION.** Beavers sometimes come out of the water, and then it's easy to recognize one with its thick reddish brown



**Beaver**

fur and flattened tail. Beavers weigh up to 50 pounds and reach a length of 3 ½ feet. If you discover a beaver swimming, all you see is its head sticking from the water. If you spot the flattened tail--you know you're looking at a beaver.

**HABITAT.** Beavers live in rivers, lakes, and ponds and their homes are in the bottom of their own constructed beaver dams. Beavers do come ashore to chop down trees to use for food and for their beaver dams, so you may see beavers along a river or pond bank.

**FOOD.** Beavers eat leaves, tree bark, and twigs. Favorite trees are aspen, willow, birch, and maple.

**WHEN TO TOOK.** Beavers are active at night, but you can see them during the late afternoon. Beavers are social animals and live in family groups so you may see several beavers working on the side of a riverbank. Often you only see one beaver swimming in the water, but your lone beaver undoubtedly has nearby relatives.

**BEAVER SIGNS.** Streamside homes are prime real estate for both homeowners and beavers. Beavers are excellent aquatic engineers. Girdled trees and gnawed tree stumps with large teeth marks indicate beavers are in the timber-harvesting business. In addition to making logs of your trees, beaver dams can result in soggy spots in your yard or flooding along local roads.

**REMARKS.** Not every beaver-baffled homeowner wants to eliminate beavers--and

you can protect your trees with fences and other barriers. Beaver can also be trapped and relocated. One health fact concerning beavers: They can host internal parasites including Giardia, an unpleasant organism that also afflicts humans and causes severe intestinal problems. You don't want to drink water from near beaver dams unless you treat the water, and you don't want to swim in it either.

### Woodchuck (Groundhog)

#### DESCRIPTION.

Woodchucks weigh 4 to 11 pounds, and are 20 to 25 inches long including a 5-inch tail. Woodchucks



**Woodchuck**

have brown fur, small eyes and ears, and short powerful forelegs with claws used for digging.

**HABITAT.** Groundhogs live in open fields, pastures, forest edges, and golf courses.

**FOOD** Woodchucks eat garden produce, grasses, apples, and herbs.

**WHEN TO LOOK.** Woodchucks are active during the day when you may even hear their shrill whistles. They are solitary and live in a burrow that may have an extensive system of tunnels over 50 feet in length. Woodchucks are true hibernators so you don't see them during the extreme cold of winter.

**WOODCHUCK SIGNS.** For the homeowner-gardener, the most annoying attribute of a woodchuck usually is its ability to eat a garden, although its excavations in a pasture may not be welcome either.

**REMARKS.** Woodchucks (and other garden-garnering wildlife) can be excluded from gardens by an electric fence.

### Raccoon

**DESCRIPTION.** Raccoons weigh 8 to 30 pounds and reach 35 inches long with a 10-inch tail. This familiar animal with mottled black and brown fur has a black mask on the face and a ringed tail.



**Raccoon**

**HABITAT.** Raccoons live in wooded areas, but increasingly they are moving into suburban areas and cities.

**FOOD.** Raccoon diet includes insects, snails, earthworms, crayfish, fish, birds, eggs, grapes, acorns, apples, and corn--and around human dwellings, garbage, pet food, garden goodies, and suet and feed at bird feeders.

**WHEN TO LOOK.** Raccoons are active at night. They are social and usually you see more than one raccoon. Raccoons are noisy and you can often hear their chattering. Raccoons don't hibernate so you can see them all year, although they may stay in a den during extremely cold weather.

**RACCOON SIGNS.** Raccoons can wreck havoc around your home--they can remove lids from garbage cans and leave the litter strewn on your lawn. They can remove tops from pet and bird feed containers and eat all your birdfeed. Raccoons can dig up your newly planted flowers.

**REMARKS.** Raccoons, ounce for ounce, can cause as much trouble as any four-



**Raccoon**

footed intruder to your home. If you store feed, keep all covers securely fastened. A mesh across flower containers and baskets helps keep raccoons from destroying your flowerbeds. Raccoons can be live-trapped and relocated. But for

every one you trap, a dozen more take its place. Raccoons are cute to watch, but they can be aggressive and can carry rabies.

### **Striped Skunk**

**DESCRIPTION.** Skunks weigh 3 to 7 pounds. They reach 25 inches long, including a 10-inch tail. Skunks have small ears and small eyes. Their fur is black with stripes along the back, and they have a bushy black tail tipped with white. Markings on striped skunks are variable.

**HABITAT.** Skunks live in forests, fields, and backyards.

**FOOD.** Skunks aren't fussy eaters and dine happily on crickets, grubs, grasshoppers, berries, grasses, acorns, mice, shrews, eggs, rabbits, eggs, carrion, and garbage.

**WHEN TO LOOK.** Skunks are active at night. Because skunks don't hibernate, you can see them all year, but they sleep through severe cold weather. You usually see just a single skunk, or you may see young skunks following their mother on a foraging expedition.



**Skunk**

**SKUNK SIGNS.** Skunk's menu--anything--may make your yard prime dining for a skunk, which could root through your garbage or plow through your garden soil looking for grubs--although you may be just as happy to have the skunk eat the grubs.

**REMARKS.** Skunks are on the least-favored animal list because of the pungent spray they can cast on perceived attackers. The spray is about as foul as a smell gets, and it takes days to disappear. On the other hand, skunks are shy and seldom attack unless they're frightened or provoked.

Skunks have soft silky fur, and deodorized skunks are often prized pets. In the wild, skunks are frequent victims of rabies.

### **Opossum**

**DESCRIPTION.** Opossums weigh 4 to 10 pounds and are the size of a large housecat. Their fur is gray-white. They have large ears and a long naked tail. Opossums are marsupials--and are related to kangaroos.



**Opossum**

**HABITAT.** Opossums live in forests, fields, and around farms, suburban areas, and towns.

**FOOD.** As with other animals that live near humans, opossums eat almost anything including insects, rabbits, snakes, moles, eggs, fruits, berries, acorns, pet food, bird feed, garbage, and carrion.

**WHEN TO LOOK.** Opossums are active at night. They are solitary, although more than one opossum may live in your neighborhood.

**OPOSSUM SIGNS.** If suet and bird feed left out during the night, disappears, it could be the work of an opossum. Opossums also help themselves to garbage.

**REMARKS.** Opossums "play dead" when threatened, and emit a foul-smelling drool. Opossums can climb and can steal your suet, so it may be necessary to bring your bird feed inside for the night. The best protection from opossum raids is tight-fitting feed containers.

### **Eastern Cottontail**

**DESCRIPTION.** Cottontail rabbits weigh 2 to 3 pounds. They have tan fur and a short cottonball-like tail.

**HABITAT.** Because they are food for birds of prey including hawks and owls, cottontails like the protection of dense cover. Look for these rabbits bushes in fields and along edges of woods.



**Rabbit**

**FOOD.** Cottontails eat grasses and vegetation including clover--and your garden. In winter, cottontails eat treebark, apples, and cherries.

**WHEN TO LOOK.** Cottontails, which are solitary, are active day and night.

**RABBIT SIGNS.** Your garden has been eaten.

**REMARKS.** Of course, raids on your garden could be from other animals besides the cottontail version of the carrot-swiping "Bugs Bunny." An electric fence can keep your garden critter-proof.

### **Norway Rat**

**DESCRIPTION.** The Norway rat weighs up to a pound and reaches a frightening 17 inches long, with a scaly tail. Fur is brown.



**Rat**

**HABITAT.** Most likely, where you don't want them--cellars, barns, buildings, sewers, garbage dumps.

**FOOD.** If they get in your house, rats will eat loaves of bread or whatever they find. Rats also eat insects, fish, grain, and carrion.

**WHEN RATS ARE ACTIVE.** Norway rats are nocturnal. They live in colonies.

**SIGNS OF RAT DAMAGE.** Ratholes in lawns, droppings, and strewn garbage.

**REMARKS.** Norway rats, which are native to China, are introduced pests. They survive anywhere, and live in underground burrows. You may require professional help to exterminate them. Rats can transmit several diseases.

### **Smaller Animals**

#### **Gray Squirrel**

**DESCRIPTION.** Gray squirrels weigh up to 1 ½ pounds and have a long bushy tail. Their fur is gray.



**Squirrel**

**HABITAT.** Gray squirrels live in the woods, and in park areas with trees.

**FOOD.** Gray squirrels eat acorns, hickory nuts, maple seeds, fruits, berries, insects, and bird's eggs.

**WHEN TO LOOK.** Gray squirrels are active during the day.

**SIGNS OF SQUIRRELS.** Usually you see squirrels as they climb on your back porch and try and rob your birdfeeders.

**REMARKS.** Squirrels don't usually bother homeowners, other than being a nuisance at feeders.

#### **Eastern Mole**

**DESCRIPTION.** This large mole reaches about 6 inches long. Its fur is slate color with a silver sheen.

**HABITAT.** This particular mole lives in tunnels under the ground.



**FOOD.** Eastern moles eat grubs and insect larvae in the ground.

**WHEN TO LOOK.** Eastern moles are active day and night, but you usually don't see them.

**SIGNS OF MOLES.** What you do see is the mound of soil the mole pushes up as it excavates through your backyard. Moles can excavate up to 18 feet an hour, which is why your lawn can so quickly look like it's been invaded by aliens.



**Mole**

**REMARKS.** On the plus side, moles eat grubs and insect larvae in your lawn, although the mole's eating and living habits also disfigure your lawn. Moles can be trapped if you don't want them in your lawn.



**Mouse**

Small, mouse-size animals--including white-footed mice, meadow voles, and short-tailed

shrews--can live in grasses and shrubs around your home. These mammals provide food for owls and hawks, which people like to have around their homes. However, these



**Shrew**

small animals also host ticks and other parasites.



**Vole**

Homeowners may enjoy attracting wildlife, but they need to take precautions to protect their families from animal borne diseases including rabies and Lyme disease.

References: *Suburban Wildlife*, by Richard Headstrom; *America's Favorite Backyard Wildlife*, by Kit and George Harrison; *Twilight Hunters: Wolves, Coyotes, and Foxes*, by Gary Turbak.