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Acton WildAware Article
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Suggested title: Mice, Woodchucks and Skunks, Oh My!

Mice

In the cold winter months, it's very challenging to keep mice out of the house! Mice can squeeze through quarter sized spaces. Seal cracks or holes with carpentry improvements or stuff cracks with steel wool, scented dryer sheets and foam insulation. It is helpful to keep pet dishes clean and empty between feedings. Repellents made of non-toxic blends of natural oils are safe to use around your pets and your family. Also for use inside your home, ultrasonic electronic devices are intended to repel rodents as well as spiders and insects.

If mice have already moved in, avoid poisons. Mice are consumed by many carnivores and omnivores such as owls, hawks, foxes, and skunks. These animals who depend on mice for food play an important role in keeping the mouse population under control and limiting the spread of mouse borne diseases. PetMD advises: Not only will poisons kill mice, but the poison could sicken your pets if they accidentally ingest or bite the rodent. From Environmental Working Group (www.ewg.org): Try preventive and non-toxic alternatives first. There are lots of effective options that don't contain pesticides. No-kill traps are readily available online, and at local retailers for mice and other animals such as opossums and raccoons. Search : "no-kill pest control" and "humane trap and release."

Woodchucks/Groundhogs

Between March and August, woodchucks, and other animals may choose to shelter in quiet, dark spaces under porches and sheds, and in garages. You may only see one animal, the mother; but during this time, assume that any wild animal denning around a home is a mother with dependent babies. The Humane Society of the United States suggests being patient if you discover a wildlife family around your home, if the animals are not causing damage or harm. The Society explains that once the young are big enough to become independent the birth den will have served its purpose. For example, for woodchucks the denning season is about 8 weeks. Ideally, by waiting a few weeks until the family has vacated the premises, you'll prevent orphaning of the young and will be able to make repairs to prevent future returns.

If you can't wait, the next best strategy is gently bothering the animals so the mother animal will relocate the litter. Recommended: Rags soaked in a strong smelling substance

such as cider vinegar (but not ammonia!), lights, and a blaring radio during nighttime hours to make the space uncomfortable. To keep woodchucks out of your garden, fencing made of hardware cloth (1/2 inch wire metal mesh) or chicken wire, 3 feet above ground and sunk 1 foot underground will deter woodchucks from digging under the fence. Curving the top of the fence outward will discourage climbing. Solar-powered electrified fences will provide effective protection, requiring two strands of conductor, usually at 4 inches and 6 to 8 inches above ground. This configuration allows easy access to the garden. Electric fencing can be configured to keep out other garden munchers, such as deer and raccoons. For safety, children will need to be taught not to touch the fence.

Skunks

According to Mass Wildlife, if you encounter a skunk, stay calm, speak softly and move away in order to give it room to leave. Once you back away, the skunk will no longer feel threatened and will move off. If it doesn't, try clapping your hands and making some noise from a safe distance. Always turn on a flood light and check your yard for skunks before letting your dog out at night. Skunks will raid open trash cans and compost piles. Secure your garbage in tough plastic containers with tight fitting lids and keep in secure buildings when possible. Take out trash the morning pick up is scheduled, not the previous night. Keep compost piles in containers designed to contain but vent the material.

Suggested book from The Humane Society of the United States:

Wild Neighbors, The Humane Approach to Living with Wildlife-Second Edition.

The following organizations were the source of the article content. To learn more about co-existing with wildlife please visit:

- Mass Wildlife
<http://www.mass.gov/eea/docs/dfg/dfw/wildlife/wildlife-living/living-with-suburban.pdf>
- Humane Society of the United States <http://www.humanesociety.org>
- National Wildlife Federation
<http://www.nwf.org/How-to-Help/Garden-for-Wildlife.aspx>
- PetMD
http://www.petmd.com/cat/wellness/evr_ct_non-toxic_pest_control_a_green_alternative

Paula Goodwin is a member of the Acton Conservation Commission who introduced WildAware with Acton Natural Resource Assistant Bettina Abe. WildAware is a program sponsored by the Town of Acton Natural Resources Department that began in September and will continue through the summer of 2016. The purpose of WildAware is to educate the community about the existence and habits of wild creatures, and the goal is increased community awareness of shared habitats. For information, call 978-929-6634 or send email to nr@acton-ma.gov.

