



Chapter 16

Dealing with Rural Wildlife

It's part of rural life

You can't really call your home rural unless you are occasionally interacting with wild critters of one sort or another. For most of us, this is an enjoyable part of the lifestyle, most of the time. Conflicts between humans and wildlife do occur though. The trick to avoiding trouble is to learn about and understand the creatures you must deal with.

They don't make good pets

Never attempt to take in wild animals as pets. We occasionally see wild critters on TV that are apparently kept as household pets. This is far from common. Life in the wild is harsh and dangerous. In order to survive, wild animals have to be tough. They must be physically strong and able to fight ferociously if they are to survive.

The wild animals seen on TV appearing as pets are very rare anomalies. Either that or they are normal animals kept by people with very special training and skills. Just how dangerous wildlife animals can be is often learned the hard way when people take in orphaned baby critters. They are usually cute and cuddly as babies but gradually become mean and unpredictable, as they grow older.

Squirrels are a good example of bad pets. A young squirrel is cute and playful. It remains friendly with the human that feeds and plays with it the most. As an adult, it will attack and bite all other humans except for its one human friend. It will even bite that human if angered. An adult squirrel's bite can perforate a human hand. Adding to that the fact that their speed and reaction time is much faster than a human's, they are anything but good house pets. If a cute little squirrel is so dangerous, imagine the problems possible with larger animals.



Momma 'Possum getting a drink water while moving babies to new den

Animal Rescue



Injured or orphaned animals may occasionally show up on your rural property. Avoid the temptation to take them in and care for them unless you have proper training. Without that training, both you and the animal may suffer.



We had previous experience at animal rescue and training as zoo docents. Our local Veterinarian learned of that. She decided to hand off to us a few of the younger wild animals that get dropped off at her office. We had some interesting experiences with those critters but never attempted to make them into pets.



Large predators

Most rural areas have wild predators. The Ozarks, where we live, have Coyotes, Bobcats, Foxes, Bears, Badgers, Eagles, Hawks, and Owls. Except for Bears, they avoid humans. Bears are large enough that they are sometimes not intimidated by our size or smell. The rest will hide from you and flee if you get too close.

The best policy as rural landowners is for us to not interfere with natural predators. They serve an important function controlling the population density of their prey. That predation is necessary to maintain the health of the prey populations.

Unfortunately, wild predators are quite willing to view our domestic pets and farm animals as prey. Domestic cats are no match for a coyote, bobcat, or even a fox. It takes a smart and tough domestic cat to stay alive outside at night in the wild. Coyotes and bobcats can kill medium sized dog if they wish.

On the other hand, wild predators are usually very cautious around human habitations. You are not likely to encounter a bobcat or coyote on your porch. When you do see one, it is usually only to see the tail end of the critter disappearing into the distance. Our outside cats survive OK by staying on our porch or near our house at night.

Predators that remain close and begin killing pets or farm animals will likely have to be destroyed. This is unfortunate but predators are a hazard to people and domestic animals if they lose their fear of humans. They are also not performing their necessary duties maintaining the health of wildlife prey populations.

Snakes and Spiders

Urban and Suburban folks usually have little contact with snakes. Their first reaction when encountering one on their rural property is fear. On farms and rural properties, snakes are important assets. We do not kill one unless it is poisonous and even then only if absolutely necessary for safety.

Snakes are predators that hunt rodents. Every mouse a snake eats is one that will not be climbing through your kitchen cabinets. Check with local conservation agencies to learn how to identify the different species of snakes commonly found in your area. Few, you will discover, are dangerous to humans. Some species, such as the Black Rat Snake are such good mouse hunters that people will release them in their barns.

Spiders are probably much less popular than snakes. Again, though, since all spiders are predators, rural folks do not bother killing them unless they are poisonous to humans or have webs in inconvenient locations. To become big and fat, a spider will have had to kill lots of other nuisance bugs. Fortunately, very few spiders are a hazard to humans so leaving them alone is a common sense and inexpensive way a reducing the number of bugs we have to deal with.

Insecticide

Probably one of the first impulses for city folks when moving to the country is to kill all the bugs on their new property. Unfortunately, that is usually not a very productive thing to attempt.

The insects and other critters on a rural property live in a balance of sorts. For each bug, there generally is another bug that wants to eat it. As with other ecologies, the bottom of the food chain is occupied by the species that feed on plants and foliage. Without the population control provided by insect predators, these plant-eating insects can do tremendous amounts of damage.

After a thorough insecticide spraying, or even simply burning underbrush, it is common to see greatly increased insect damage to foliage. Insecticide kills both prey and predator insects. One of the most common survival strategies employed by prey insect species is to simply reproduce more prolifically than their predators. It often takes months or even years for the prey/predator balance to return.

Chiggers, Ticks, and Mosquitoes

For most rural folks, biting insects are a much greater nuisance than four-legged furry critters. Animals tend to avoid us. Insects seek us out for their attacks. With some simple precautions, they will be only a minor problem.

Chiggers are tiny insects that, once matured, feed on the eggs and larvae of other insects. Adult Chiggers do not bite humans. It is the nearly invisibly tiny larval chiggers that are the problem. Chigger larvae must have a feeding from an animal to obtain the nutrients necessary to mature into an adult. The larval Chigger crawls to a hair follicle or skin pore and injects a chemical that dissolves a small number of skin cells. After drinking the fluid, the Chigger drops off. They do not burrow into the skin nor suck blood. Though Chigger bites are not likely to transmit diseases, the irritation from the injected chemical causes a skin bump that itches for a week or more.

Ticks are blood-sucking insects. Their entire lives are spent in a cycle of finding animals to feed on and sucking blood. Ticks simply climb onto a prospective host, find a place to feed, feed, and then drop off. During its lifetime, a tick may feed from several different hosts. Blood born diseases may be transmitted between hosts.

There are two main types of ticks, soft-bodied and hard-bodied. Soft-bodied ticks remain attached for no more than a few hours. Hard-bodied ticks will remain attached

for up to two weeks. Since disease transmission by a tick typically does not happen within the first two hours or so, hard-bodied ticks are the greater potential threat.

You will have to check with local health or conservation official to find out what kinds of ticks are found in your part of the country. In any event, ticks should be removed from your skin as soon as discovered. Though only a small percentage of the ticks in any area may carry a disease of concern to humans, they should all be treated as if they do.

Ticks may be removed by carefully pulling them off your skin. The tick should be grasped in a way that does not squeeze the tick's body and cause its stomach contents to be injected into the wound. Once removed, the tick should be examined to confirm that its head is still attached. Ticks are extraordinarily tough critters so their heads do not come off easily but it is best to make sure your skin is free of a foreign object that might cause an infection.

The main defense against Chiggers and ticks employed by rural folks is to keep the areas around where they live and work mowed. Ticks prefer to climb up on grass stems and shrubs to grab animals as they pass by. Chiggers often use the same tactic. Both however will also crawl along the ground if necessary to reach a host. Chiggers and ticks avoid areas of mowed grass. Low ground cover and short grass provides little protection from the hot sun and is not good for grabbing a passing host.

Common insect repellants work well for preventing Chigger and tick bites. These insects must crawl over your skin to find a feeding location so receive a more intimate exposure to the repellant's chemicals that would a flying insect like a mosquito. A commonly used and inexpensive repellant used by people who must work in areas known to have ticks and Chiggers is Avon Skin-So-Soft bath oil. It remains skin for a long time without an insect repellant odor. Skin-So-Soft provides relatively little protection from Mosquitoes.

Mosquitoes are a worldwide problem. I doubt there is anyone on the planet that is not familiar with these annoying pests. I probably do not need to discuss them in any detail here. As flying insects, they can obviously travel for much greater distances than crawling critters such as Chiggers and ticks. Their potential for spreading disease is therefore much greater. Use the commonly available mosquito repellants as needed.

Mosquito abatement is a complex problem. In the past, DDT was an effective tool. There is no equivalent alternative available. Instead, techniques such as dumping out water standing in open containers to keep them from breeding and using screens to keep them away from us.

Surprisingly, recreational ponds are usually not a big mosquito problem. Fish and other insect predators feed on mosquito larvae. Boggy, marshy areas are a problem, however, and there is relatively little available in the way of tools or chemicals that can reduce the mosquito problem in those environments.

A technique used to avoid mosquitoes in some parts of the country where these insects are a problem is to build a platform fifteen feet or more above the ground. Mosquitoes tend to remain within a few feet of the ground so these platforms allow people to enjoy warm evenings outdoors without major mosquito attacks.

Skunk antidote

Skunks are common in all rural areas. Most of us get through our lives without being sprayed by one. If that should happen, however, knowing how to get rid of the overpowering smell will be important. Very important!

You are in luck. A formula does exist that is very effective at neutralizing skunk spray. A chemist named Paul Krebaum invented it. His work at Molex Inc. in Lisle, Illinois occasionally involved obnoxious smelling chemicals similar in makeup to that produced by skunks. When asked for help by a friend whose cat had an unfortunate disagreement with a skunk, Paul was able to develop a Skunk spray antidote.

That magic formula is very simple: one quart of three percent hydrogen peroxide, a quarter cup of baking soda, and a teaspoon of liquid soap. This concoction really works. A segment on the popular TV series “Mythbusters” tested a variety of commercial and non-commercial skunk spray remedies. Paul Krebaum’s formula, described on the show as the “home remedy”, outperformed all others by a large margin.

We, unfortunately, had the opportunity to test the efficacy of Paul’s formula ourselves. Our son’s dog learned the inadvisability of attempting to chase a skunk. The poor dog was sprayed so thoroughly that he even reeked upwind. After sponging him with three quarts of the mixture, the odor was tamed enough that the dog could be allowed back in the house. He still had a skunk odor but it was not overpowering and it didn’t transfer onto things in the house.

I recommend that you write Paul’s formula on a piece of paper and tape inside the door to your medicine cabinet or someplace else that will be easy to remember and easy to find. If you ever need it, you will need this formula very quickly. Hunting for a copy of this book will take time you will not want to waste.



Night time bandits on the prowl

Raccoons and garbage cans

Raccoons are the masked bandits of the animal kingdom. They are experts at opening garbage cans to get at food scraps. They are notoriously bad at cleaning up the messes they make while rifling through your garbage. Most folks who live in rural areas will eventually have to deal with these critters.

Our first experience with raccoons digging through our garbage cans was not really a surprise but it sure was a mess. We had been warned about the problem but had not given it much thought. We now have permanent greasy raccoon paw prints on our porch and handrails to remind us our error. We hadn't coated our exterior wood with Thompson's Water Seal yet. Bacon grease from the garbage soaked deep into the wood leaving ample evidence as to the identity of the culprits.

We eventually discovered a scheme that worked to keep the raccoons out of the cans. We use locking plastic garbage cans. We use bungee cords to keep the cans locked. We placed twenty pounds chunks of concrete in the bottom of the cans so they could not be tipped over. We use trashcan liners but don't let them stick out from under the lid to be grabbed by little paws. That combination seems to have stopped them. In fairness though, something else we did may have may have helped.

We started putting table scraps and popcorn in a dish outside our basement to lure critters close to the house. We wanted to show our grandson what they looked like.

We found we enjoyed watching the animals that showed up at the bowl. We also found it was a handy alternative to our garbage disposal. We eventually began putting out a small amount of inexpensive dry cat food on evenings that we had nothing else for the bowl. Since we started doing that the raccoons have ignored our garbage cans.

A key point to keep in mind is that there really are things that go bump in the night. They are the raccoons, possums, and other critters that will be sharing your property. You must learn to never leave anything out at night that will interest them because they will investigate it, and make a mess with it if they have a chance. With time and experience, you will find ways to avoid conflicts.

Feeding wildlife

In general, it is not a good idea to feed wild animals. There are obvious exceptions such helping starving animals during extreme weather conditions. Wild critters should not be allowed to develop a dependency on artificial feeding under normal environmental conditions. With that said, we put a small amount of food out for the wild critters on our property. It amounts to merely a treat for them, not sufficient to live on.

There are obvious problems that can occur when wildlife becomes used to humans. Wild animals have a tough existence, requiring strength, speed, and aggressiveness to survive. Their behavior can become erratic and dangerous unexpectedly. In all cases, feeding should not occur with humans present. They should be allowed to retain their natural wariness of humans.

We put relatively small quantities of various kinds of food out most days. As described above, we put a couple hands full of cheap cat food into a large bowl for raccoons and possums. During the winter we also toss a little dried corn out for the squirrels and turkeys. They seem to appreciate the food and we enjoy the free wildlife show they provide.

There have been some interesting situations that have occurred. While the local raccoons and possums have come to consider us as non-predators, they remain wary and avoid us. There have been exceptions though. We have had at different times injured raccoons and possums show up in the middle of the day or early evening to sit at the food bowl. They waited quietly while we brought food out for them. They ate and went back to their dens. We would see them days later healed but limping, back on their normal nightly patrol schedules.

Wildlife Habitat enhancement

The presence or absence of small foraging animals such as rabbits, possums, and raccoons can be controlled to some degree. We enjoy watching wild critters so are more interested in attracting them than chasing them away. Some people prefer to discourage wildlife from visiting their property.

Discouraging wild animals from coming around is a matter of clearing out underbrush that might be used for cover and making sure there are no food sources available. Clearing out the underbrush, also known as ‘parking out’ a property in many parts of the country, is popular. Removing food sources is often problematic as landscaping plants may actually be food for some animals and even those animals that aren’t interested in the plants may dig them up looking for insects and worms.

Attracting wildlife is far easier than discouraging it. Leaving woods and brushy areas undisturbed requires no work as compared to clearing it and keeping it cleared. When trees are cut for firewood, their branches are simply piled up where the tree fell to provide cover for small animals.

Additional variety in habitat can be achieved by creating a few strips of tall grass covered ground. Mow them a couple times during the summer to discourage growth of shrubs and trees. Birds can feed on the seed and deer can eat the grass.

Adding a pond to an otherwise dry area will greatly increase its habitability. Woods with gullies and brushy areas surround our pond. The number of animals of all sizes has increased dramatically over the years that this reliable source of water has been available.

In general, improving the habitability of our woods for wild critters has been both easy and rewarding. We enjoy watching and interacting with the wildlife around us on our rural property. We like that the richness and diversity of life has increased by our being here to manage the land.

Lessons learned about wildlife

1. There really are things that go “bump” in the night. At least that is what the raccoons and skunks have taught us.
2. Don’t forget to use the Skin-So-Soft in the spring, even on cold rainy days. You cannot see the ticks crawling on you when you have clothes on. A tick can latch onto you in a VERY inconvenient place.