

GARDENING WITH WILDLIFE

The Dark Side of Trapping and Relocating

by Nancy Lawson

Each spring and summer, the lost and wounded flood wildlife rehabilitation centers nationwide. There are the mother opossums with broken tails and missing fingers. The emaciated baby groundhogs and dehydrated baby skunks. The terrified rabbits with bloodied fur.

Despite their conditions, they're the fortunate ones. Many others are never found. Once out of sight and out of the minds of people who've trapped and released them elsewhere, displaced animals are usually out of luck.

Often thought of as humane, trapping and relocating wildlife causes significant suffering. Good intentions don't always equal good interventions, and suddenly yanking animals from their homes has far-reaching consequences. Mothers are separated from young, leaving orphans to wither away. If they survive transport, adults can become as disoriented as kidnapped humans dumped in a foreign land, rendering useless their cognitive maps of resources and escape routes.

"They don't have any experience in this new area far from their original home range," says John Griffin, senior director of urban wildlife programs at the Humane Society of the U.S. "They don't know where any loafing spots are. They don't know where to get food or water. And they're in direct conflict with other animals of their own species that have already staked out all these places."

Trapping also causes collateral damage, as a gardener discovered after his baited trap set for groundhogs caught and injured a rabbit. "There's something called capture myopathy with a lot of animals, especially prey species, where they become so stressed and it wreaks havoc on their systems," says Jane Newhouse of Newhouse Wildlife Rescue in Chelmsford, Massachusetts, who tried unsuccessfully to treat the rabbit for shock.



When gardeners trap groundhogs and other wildlife, they often unintentionally separate mothers from their young.

Animals confined in traps deteriorate quickly in inclement weather. "They don't have the normal recourse of being able to protect themselves and shelter themselves," says Griffin,

who has seen wildlife left for dead in extreme heat or freezing temperatures.

RELOCATION DOESN'T WORK
As harmful as translocation is, it's also



Relocating animals can cause extreme stress and early mortality.



Squirrels and other mammals keep alternate nests and can move their young to safety when humanely excluded from a structure.

ineffective. A garden or structure that's inviting to one animal will attract more unless the environment is changed. More often than not, there isn't even a problem in the first place—just a misguided sense that certain species don't belong. "Reputations and naming conventions and perceptions of these animals, especially negative ones, can take on their own narrative that gets shared and reinforced by the people around you," says Griffin. "It becomes expected that the animals should be treated that way, and there's no social consequence for it."

Among the 100-plus conflict-related calls that WildCare in Noble, Oklahoma, receives daily during peak season, many are resolved with simple adjustments: securing trash to deter raccoons or removing bird seed that's attracting mice and coyotes. But the biggest adjustment is a mental one, especially for animals like opossums, who are frequently trapped and come in with wounded noses and bloodied gums.

"People say, 'They're digging up my yard.' But opossums don't dig," says director of education Kristy Wicker. "They don't spray. They usually don't bite. They don't carry diseases. They're really good groomers, and they keep themselves very clean of ticks."

For known diggers like skunks and armadillos foraging for beetle larvae, WildCare encourages patience. "They usually go through a yard in a night or two, and when the grubs are gone, they move on."

WHEN WILDLIFE MOVES INSIDE

If the situation is more intrusive—squirrels in attics or raccoons under decks—humane exclusion is an option. "Animals seek out the places they do because they're warm, dark and quiet," says Wicker. "So if we can make that area not those things, they will often move on their own."

After a mother raises her young and leaves, hardware cloth sunk into the ground blocks further access. For evic-

tion of animals inside homes, Wicker suggests sensory disruption—loud talk radio, bright lights—to encourage mothers to move to alternate denning sites; wild mammals keep such spots on reserve for emergencies. Once families leave, repairing entry points prevents repeated encroachment. (If you hire a wildlife services company, choose one that excludes parents from re-entry into structures while ensuring they're reunited with their young.)

"They're just trying to raise their babies just like we do," says Wicker. She relishes calls like the one from a homeowner who saw a skunk going underwater to rescue her young from a flooded culvert. "The mama pulled one out, and she set it aside on the grass, and then she went back and back again. It was so touching."

When baby animals lose their moms, they often need months of intensive care. Even an eventual return to the wild doesn't guarantee a positive outcome. "We do our best, but we can't teach everything a mama raccoon or skunk or opossum can teach," says Wicker.

At some facilities, orphans may become permanent residents. Unable to live on his own due to epilepsy, Stanley the groundhog spends his days at Newhouse eating kale and walking outside on a harness. He also charms garden club members, helping them understand groundhogs' roles as ecosystem engineers who till soil and create burrows that shelter other animals such as turtles and foxes.

A relative of Stanley lives in my habitat, and if I ever want to exclude her from a garden patch, there's a humane solution: fencing with sunken L-shaped footers and wobbly tops to deter digging and climbing. But I'd rather share the buffet of fleabanes, sumacs, and clover with my wild neighbor, whose ancestors called this place home long before I did and whose descendants, I hope, will still be here, trap-free, long after I'm gone.

For more information on humane conflict resolution and exclusion, visit wildneighbors.org. ■

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