

The Spinneret

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In this issue it seems I've set a personal record for verbosity. Unfortunately this means a couple of the regular columns have ended up on the cutting room floor. They will return with the next issue. This issue focuses on some things we take for granted that can get us in trouble. Hopefully you find the information timely and useful.

If you have a pest topic you would like me to address please mail it to me or call us. - Ed.

Critter Chronicles:

The Good, The Bad & The Ugly

Everyone loves living in a place where wildlife and people can co-exist. That's good.

When wildlife starts damaging our homes or putting our health at risk that's bad.

When wildlife has to be destroyed because of ignorance, carelessness or irresponsibility, that's ugly.

Last year, we removed raccoons from two dozen homes, one where the animal tore shakes off the roof to get in. A local girl was bit by a raccoon while feeding it on her own deck. A deer walked through a closed sliding glass door where the homeowner was feeding them on the deck.

Every year I'm called on to help with an ever increasing number of negative wildlife encounters and almost all have one thing in common, feeding.

Nothing attracts like free food. Fire up the barbecue and put up a sign that says "Free Food" and someone will show up even if you have a mile long dirt driveway on a dead end street.

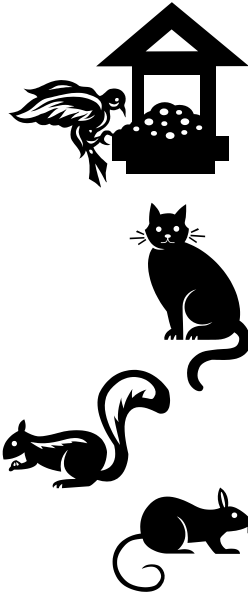
Same holds true for wildlife. Hang up a bird feeder and in no time you will have birds AND mice, rats, squirrels, raccoons, deer, geese, ducks and yes, occasionally bear. You will also attract a host of predators like cats, crows, hawks, owls and coyotes.

Feed a raccoon and you have a friend for life AND its siblings, offspring, cousins, distant relatives, casual acquaintances and complete strangers.

Feed a squirrel and you (or a neighbor) will have a hole in your house and the pitter patter of little feet in the attic in no time.

"Free" feed your cat or dog outside by putting down enough food to last all day or by using a self filling bowl and you are feeding the neighborhood in no time.

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The Honey Do List:

As Spring rolls out the green carpet many of us look forward to sprucing up the flower beds. A couple things should be kept in mind.

Plants against the foundation provide harborage for rodents and insects. Allow at least 12 inches along the foundation for air flow to dry the siding and soil.

Trim shrubs up from the bottom and rake out leaf litter to expose rodents to predators. This also removes debris that can support mold and fungus that can then infect your plants.

Make sure soil isn't blocking the foundation vents. This reduces air flow into the crawlspace, introduces unwanted moisture into your home and causes the metal screens to rust out. ■



Creepy Crawlies:

Got Ants? Maybe it's something in the water.

When ants make a raid on the kitchen the only thing you want to do is get rid of them. Unfortunately, getting rid of them isn't nearly as important as, why are they there? What made your home the place to live?

Even though they can survive just fine in our cold climate, the most common ant invaders have two things in common, they are attracted to temperatures between 80 and 90 degrees and humidity between 80 and 90 percent.

Now you are probably wondering, where are they going to find those conditions in western Washington? Surprisingly, even on a cool day a flat rock setting in direct sunlight will do quite nicely.

In our homes there are many places where these conditions can occur but the kitchen and bath rooms are the most vulnerable.

Cook dinner and run the dish washer and, presto, 80% humidity. Add a transformer for the phone or appliance and voila! Habitat no ant can resist.

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Critter Chronicles:

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Feeding causes animals to stop foraging and creates opportunities for diseases to be spread by sharing the same bowl or fighting with competitors or pets. Distemper, worms, fleas, ticks and other ailments can be traded right there at the feeder. There is a reason your veterinarian has you treat your pets for these things. Wildlife doesn't have that option.

Left to their own devices wild animals are well equipped to find food and shelter and natural foraging reduces the spread of disease.

Artificially high populations supported by feeders put constant pressure on your home and your neighbors homes as animals attempt to live close to the food. Birds will peck out screens in attic vents. Squirrels will chew through rubber seals around roof vents and blocking in soffits. Raccoons will rip the screens out of foundation vents. Rodents will exploit any opening big enough to get their head through.

Once inside, the animals build nests and raise young year after year.

During their stay many animals will pull down insulation or contaminate it with their droppings. Rodents will chew on plumbing and wiring causing leaks and creating fire hazards.

This is usually when I receive the phone call asking to trap the offending animal(s). And this is the point where I have to deliver the bad news.

Animal removal between March and August usually includes babies. We won't take mom if the babies can't be removed first because they die. This isn't just ugly, it can cause odor problems that will force you from your home, fly problems as the bodies decay, and parasite problems as fleas, ticks and mites move away from the bodies.

Finding the young and removing them often means cutting open walls or pulling out the tub or shower. The alternative is to allow the young to mature enough to start venturing from the nest then trapping the whole family or installing a device that will let them exit but not re-enter.

In the event it is necessary to trap we do not relocate. A special permit is required for relocation because the animal has to be acclimated to the release area and cannot be a detriment to animals or people that already live there.

We either have to release the animal back into the wild where we found it or, if it poses a danger to humans, arrange to destroy it.

So in case I'm being too subtle... DONT FEED WILDLIFE!

In rural areas one feeder is insignificant. In a community the size of Ocean Shores (12 square miles) if one person in ten has a feeder that's 500 feeders. If the average person buys 20 pounds of seed a month that's 120,000 pounds of feed every year. That doesn't even begin to count pet food bought for raccoons or stolen from pets.

If you really want to see animals in your yard without changing their foraging habits, landscape with plants that are attractive to them. It doesn't take many flowers for the deer to put you on the pruning circuit. Many native plants attract birds and don't produce so much excess that rodents will be attracted. Bird houses are just as attractive as feeders and easier to maintain.

For more ideas, Washington Dept. of fish and Wildlife offers an excellent book called "Landscaping For Wildlife In The Pacific Northwest". And can be found at <http://wdfw.wa.gov/wlm/landscap.htm> ■

Creepy Crawlies:

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Take a shower and steam up the mirror, ta da, 80% humidity. Add a night light for a bit of extra heat and, sha-zam, ant condo in the wall socket.

Its that easy.

Condensation is another way moisture can build up in your home. A one degree drop in temperature raises the moisture load in the air two and a half percent.

A typical home with the thermostat set at 60 degrees with 70% humidity will condense moisture on any surface that is 45 degrees or below. Window sills are particularly vulnerable to this kind of moisture and on sunny days this moisture will flash off creating the high temperature & humidity ants love.

There are several systems built into your home to control moisture, some you see every day others you won't see without remodeling your home.

Because heat rises, your house literally acts like a chimney sucking on the ground. For that reason all new construction has a layer of plastic installed over the soil in the crawlspace. One square yard of exposed soil under your home can release 2 quarts of water vapor a day into the structure.

The building envelope (roof, walls, floors) is a passive system made of multiple layers of material to protect against moisture entering and a system of vents to allow moisture to escape. It also has seals and caulk to stop air infiltration and insulation to prevent condensation on the inside of your home. Assuming your home was assembled correctly, these elements require little or no attention short of keeping them in good repair. (paint, caulk, roofing).

The rest of the systems are active, like exhaust fans, dryer exhausts, and range vents designed to carry saturated air directly outside. These devices have to be vented to the exterior of the building not into the attic or crawlspace and they are usually fitted with screens or filters that need frequent cleaning to prevent them from getting clogged with dust. Bathroom fans and range fans must be used consistently to avoid moisture build up.

Your heating system is also a critical element in the control of moisture in your home by heating and drying the air. With forced air heating you can often have it set up to operate with a slight positive pressure which forces moisture out of walls and even reduces dust drawn into the building by the chimney effect. (**Don't** attempt this without professional help. Negative pressure can make the problem worse or cause gas appliances to back draft.)

In these energy conscious times its tempting to turn the thermostat down but below 58 degrees you run the risk of condensation and mildew. If you turn the heat off for extended periods during cold weather you can get huge moisture loads in dry wall, timbers and furniture and risk doing serious damage to your home.

Even armed with this information you may still have moisture problems. You should get professional advice if you regularly encounter mold or mildew and the ants may actually be the good guys shouting, "HEY! The water is over here!" ■

