

Animals in the Garden

The following wild animals frequent areas around homes. Because of the increase of residential development in Delaware, people are more likely to encounter these animals in their gardens and yards. Control methods are suggested for those times when animal populations reach the pest level.

Bats

Though not really associated with the garden, these little, furry, winged mammals are also quite beneficial, consuming great quantities of harmful insects. Yet many people regard them with disgust and fear. The danger of rabid bats is highly publicized and greatly exaggerated.

Control: When bats occasionally take up seasonal residence in a house, the only real solution is to "bat-proof" the building. This involves carefully sealing up all the openings through which the bats can enter. Naphthalene (moth flakes or crystals) is sometimes a temporary repellent. Poisons are not recommended.

Birds

Most urban dwellers like birds on or about their property. Some species, such as non-migratory geese, gulls, pigeons, grackles (and other blackbirds) or woodpeckers, may wear out their welcome. Most birds are protected or subject to hunting regulations (geese and mourning doves, for example). You must be careful how you minimize the nuisance.

Control: Modify the habitat. For pigeons and other roosting birds, use special Nixalite wire or thin tin wire fastened to or suspended over ledges and areas they use. Seal off and close up holes to exclude pigeons, starlings, sparrows or other birds that become a nuisance by nesting inside a house, barn or other structure. Most birds are visual, so scare tactics that involve movement, noise and bright colors are often effective in driving nuisance birds elsewhere. Change the negative scare stimulus frequently since birds become accustomed to such techniques. Recorded distress calls drive away birds such as crows, and models of birds of prey (hawks/owls) may also be effective if the position of the model is moved frequently. Try taking food away if that is the attraction to the nuisance species. Removing shelter and food may reduce nuisance birds but may also result in fewer of the desirable wildlife you hope to attract.

Cats and Dogs

Not all cat/dog owners care for their pets as neighboring homeowners might want. Also, neighborhoods may have a population of feral cats or wild dogs.

Control: Problem cats/dogs may be best handled by local animal control agencies. This approach might help settle a problem of someone else's pet or a wild animal that uses your yard as a bathroom or digs up your flower beds. Repellent sprays such as "Get Off My Garden" may be effective to keep digging or wandering animals away from shrubs, flowers or vegetables. Keep garbage lids on tight and put pepper sauce or other repellent on trash left at the curb. This will discourage "looting" by animals. Put bird feeders in the open to reduce cat predation.

Chipmunks

Chipmunks are ground-dwelling relatives of squirrels. Chipmunks are easy to distinguish. They have short, pointy heads marked with two white stripes--one above and the other and below the eye--and five black lines with white striping down the back. Their bushy tails are darker in color on top and rust-colored below. They sit upright and hold food with their front feet. Their communication of high-pitched chirping is distinctive. Chipmunks favor areas with stone walls or rotting logs and heavy ground cover. They burrow but excavate the dirt, so tunnel entrances are well concealed. They are omnivores and eat insects, salamanders, acorns, seeds, yewberries, some grains and fruits. They hoard food for winter and carried in special cheek pouches.

A valuable forest inhabitant, chipmunks move seeds around for tree regeneration, and they are an important food source for birds and other mammals. They may dig up freshly planted seeds or eat the occasional flower but otherwise do little damage.

Control: Reduce the attractive cover or nesting sites to discourage their reproduction. Live-trapping may be necessary if they get inside homes or sheds or become too numerous. Use peanut butter, sunflower seeds, bacon or apple slices as bait.

Deer

Deer feed on farmers crops, grass, twigs, bark and evergreens in wooded sites. Attitudes toward deer vary greatly. Some neighbors encourage deer presence because of a fondness for nature while others go to great lengths to keep them out of the vegetable garden and from eating the shrubbery. If it is green, deer may eat it. New, tender garden plants or flowers and trees in the yard are high on their list of favorite foods.

Control: Fencing is one method to protect garden crops from deer. Since deer jump, you need an 8-foot fence for best results or stout chicken-wire fencing securely around smaller garden

plots. Or, fence the area with a thorny shrub/tree--preferably something that will grow to 6 feet. Deer eat roses and some thorns but Russian olive, hawthorn, boxwood and holly will exclude them.

Deer are deterred by dogs, hanging aluminum foil, aluminum plates, mirrors, wood that hits objects in the wind and other noise-makers. Deer also switch food sources and habitat when confronted with repellent chemicals; some of these are contact repellents that taste bad while others merely smell terrible. These are marketed under a number of commercial brands, but they may not necessarily work for you. Some old-fashioned repellents are human hair, feather meal and blood, or meat meal. Hanging bars of fragrant deodorant soap from branches may work. Other well-known deer repellents are mothballs or moth flakes spread on the ground or put in mesh bags for hanging in a tree. No repellent is 100 percent effective, specially if deer population is high and deer are starving. Also deer, like most animals, adjust to the same stimulus, so heavy deer pressure requires using more than one technique.

Fox

Two fox species inhabit Delaware--the red fox and the gray fox. It is the red variety that you will most likely encounter. Resembling a small dog, the red fox weighs 8 to 12 pounds, and measures 22 to 25 inches in length, with an additional 14 to 16 inches for the tail. Its fur is typically a bright rusty-red or red-orange; the underside is white, and the bushy tail is tipped with white. Its legs and feet are blackish. The red fox can adapt to most habitats within its range, but prefers thinly populated, rolling farm and suburban land, with wooded areas, streams and marshes. Foxes eat a variety of foods, including mice, rats, rabbits, groundhogs, opossums, birds, eggs, insects and fruits. Their keen hearing, vision and sense of smell aid in detecting prey. They sometimes bury stashes of food for later consumption. Occasionally, they feed on carrion (dead animals). Foxes hunt mainly at night and are most active during the early hours of darkness and very early morning hours. They do not hibernate, remaining active year-around.

Control: Even though they may snatch an occasional chicken, foxes should be considered beneficial. Not only do they help control rodent populations, thereby serving farmers and gardeners alike, foxes benefit all of us by enriching the natural world and helping to maintain ecological balance.

Groundhogs

The groundhog, or woodchuck, is a large rodent, about two feet long, including its bushy tail. It has a compact, chunky body supported by short, strong legs. The forefeet, which have long, curved claws, are well adapted for digging. The coarse fur is gray on the upper body and yellowish-orange on the underside.

Groundhogs prefer to live in open fields, woodlands and hedgerows. They dig extensive burrows with two or more entrances. These burrows are commonly located in fields, pastures, along fence rows, stone walls, roadsides, and even at the bases of trees. Groundhogs feed on a variety of vegetables, grasses and legumes. Some favorite foods are peas, beans, carrot tops, alfalfa, clover and grasses. Early morning and evening hours are the groundhog's preferred feeding times.

Control: Needless to say, groundhogs living near vegetable gardens and other choice plantings can be real pests. Control measures are limited in residential and suburban areas. Wire fencing discourages them sometimes. Live-trapping may also be effective; bait the trap with apple slices or vegetables such as carrots or ears of corn. Another method is flushing the animals from their burrows, then filling the entrances with large rocks. Admittedly, none of these solutions will take care of the problem permanently, but they may reduce the damage groundhogs do.

Mice and Rats

Mice and rats like to eat the same food people, and they delight in shredding the things we cherish to make their nests. They also leave droppings and can spread diseases to humans by way of their bites, their fleas/microbes and by partially eating the same foods we eat.

Mice may become bothersome. The white-footed mouse and deer mouse typically stay outside, but the house mouse prefers inside shelter. Whether outside or in, mice do not travel far, preferring cover to open spaces. Most mice are nocturnal. Although they see poorly, they have well-developed senses of smell, taste and hearing. In addition to eating stored food, they eat insects, fruit, nuts, seeds and mushrooms; few mice eat green vegetables.

Rats are bigger than mice with proportionally larger heads and hind feet. Several species live in or around humans, such as the Norway rat (also called barn, sewer, wharf rat), roof rat (also called black or ship rat) and pack rats (also called wood rats in the East and kangaroo rats in the western United States). Rats are good climbers, diggers and aerial highwire artists. They eat some strange things such as electric wires and water pipes, and they love garbage dumps. They are so taste-sensitive that it is difficult to get them to consume a toxic bait.

Control: It isn't easy getting rid of mice or rats; they like living with us and have such varied diets. Start by modifying their environment and take away their food supply--food intended for pets, for example--and hiding places. Neither mice nor rats have large territories. Exclude them from storage areas, but remember they can quickly gnaw small openings into larger ones. Use concrete, metal or hardware cloth to keep them out. Trapping mice and rats can be frustrating. Live-trapping works well for field-type mice and rats, but are less effective for house mice or Norway rats. Glue boards and snap-type traps are more commonly used. Bait these with hot dogs, chocolate w/nuts, bacon, peanut butter or marshmallows. If you just want to drive them away, try using moth balls or sticky surfaces (paint cardboard with tanglefoot). Use poisons carefully and sparingly so no harm comes to non-target organisms. Always place poisons in a safety container and position them so that mice and rats have to enter to take the bait.

Moles

Moles are seldom-seen little animals, but they can cause problems for some homeowners and gardeners. Burrowing mammals, moles have road, shovel-like front feet. Their diet consists almost entirely of insects, earthworms and other small soil life. In this way, moles can be beneficial, consuming large numbers of harmful insects, including beetle grubs, cutworms and wireworms. Their tunneling may help loosen and aerate the soil, allowing better penetration of water, lime and fertilizer. However, in their search for food, moles often tunnel near the soil surface, heaving the ground up in ridges. Extensive burrowing can cause the surface of the

lawn to be lumpy, making walking and mowing more difficult. Moles also can damage plants by causing air pockets around the roots, and by dislodging shallow-rooted plants. Mole tunnels may also be used by field mice to reach and eat the roots, tubers and bulbs of garden plants.

Control: There are mole traps that are effective if used properly. You also can discourage moles by controlling the grub population in the lawn. (See HYG - 61, Moles, for more information.)

Opossum

The opossum is a light gray, longhaired mammal about the size of a house cat. It has a long snout, dark beady eyes, large hairless ears and a long, rat-like tail. It is also the only North American marsupial--an animal that carries its young in a special abdominal pouch. Nocturnal animals, opossums live in a variety of habitats, but prefer wooded areas near streams or marshes. They seek shelter in the burrows of other animals, tree cavities, brush piles and similar cover. Occasionally, they take up residence under buildings. They eat practically anything, including small fish, birds and other animals, insects, berries and other fruits, grass, eggs and carrion. Opossums living near people may rummage through compost piles and get into garbage cans, bird feeders and pet foods.

Control: Opossums are seldom a serious pest problem. They can be caught easily in a live trap. Place the trap in a location frequented by opossums, and bait with fruit, cheese or slightly spoiled fish or meat. Release a captured opossum in a suitable area several miles away. Make your property less attractive to opossums by sealing off burrows and holes under buildings and by securing garbage cans and other outside food sources.

Rabbits

The common cottontail rabbit is easy to recognize. These long-eared, brownish-gray mammals with powder-puff tails and gentle dispositions thrive in both rural and suburban areas.

Rabbits prefer dense thickets or other areas of heavy vegetation. They thrive in open woodlands, in brushy fence rows and field borders, as well as in suburban and urban yards. Active year-round, rabbits feed in the spring and summer on succulent green plants. In fall and winter, they eat buds, twigs and the bark of trees and shrubs. Rabbits love what the gardener has to offer. Among their favorite vegetables are lettuce, peas, beans and beets. The tulip is one of their favorite flowers. Young fruit trees, brambles and evergreen seedlings are often damaged during the dormant season, because rabbits chew off tender bark, twigs and young stems.

Control: You can discourage rabbits by removing their cover. This may involve regular mowing, cutting and removing unwanted brush and undergrowth. Repellents are sometimes effective. Protect vegetables and flowers with mothballs, dried blood or ground limestone. Wire barriers also provide excellent protection. Enclose small garden areas with 1-inch mesh chicken wire, two feet high. The trunks of young fruit trees and other susceptible woody plants can be protected with cylinders of 1/4-inch mesh hardware cloth (which will also ward off mice). Live-trapping is another control method. Purchase a live-trap from a garden center, hardware store or a mail-order firm. Put the trap in a place rabbits are known to frequent, and bait it with

pieces of apple, carrot or cabbage. Promptly release trapped rabbits several miles away in a rural area.

Raccoon

The raccoon is a distinctively marked, stocky mammal related to the bear. It has a prominent black "mask" over the eyes, a heavily furred, ringed tail, and hand-like front feet. A mature animal is 2 to 3 feet long and weighs 12 to 25 pounds. Raccoons prefer deciduous woodlands near streams, lakes or marshes. They den in hollow trees or logs, rock crevices, animal burrows or brush piles. Sometimes, however, they will use a chimney, attic or space beneath a porch, outbuilding or vacation cabin for a den. A nocturnal animal, raccoons hunt for food at night and eat a varied diet. In spring and early summer, they live on small animals, such as insects, crayfish, clams and mussels, fish and frogs. In late summer and fall, they add berries and other fruits, nuts and grains to their carnivorous diets. They sometimes eat garden vegetables, especially sweet corn.

Control: Store garbage in durable hard-to-tip containers with tight-fitting lids. To keep raccoons out of the vegetable garden, a one- or two-wire electric fence is effective; activate the fence at dusk and turned it off at daybreak. Seal off burrows and openings under buildings to prevent raccoons from using the area as a den. A heavy metal grid fastened securely over the chimney top will prevent entry. When sealing off a building, make sure no animals are trapped inside. Raccoons can be captured in a live trap of suitable size and sturdiness. Bait the trap with canned fish. Take trapped animals to an isolated area several miles away to release.

Shrews

Shrews are tiny mammals often mistaken for moles or voles. Shrews are generally smaller, however, and have long, slender snouts and needle-like front teeth; in contrast, mice have chisel-shaped teeth. Shrews also lack the greatly enlarged front feet characteristic of moles. The species common in our area is the northern short-tailed shrew. Like moles, shrews eat insects and worms. They also are fond of slugs, snails and millipedes. Shrews must eat continuously during the day to meet their high energy needs.

Control: Learn to recognize shrews and make them feel welcome in your garden. If you insist on discouraging them, however, keep the yard and garden neat and trimmed. Also, domestic cats are great predators of shrews, though they seldom eat them.

Skunks

With its jet black fur and prominent white stripes down the back, the skunk is recognizable to most of us. A member of the weasel family, the skunk has a stout body, a long, bushy tail, short, stocky legs, and feet with long claws, well adapted for digging. The striped skunk--the species most common in Delaware--is about the size of an ordinary house cat. Skunks are common throughout Delaware, where woodlands are interspersed with open fields or farmland. But they also inhabit many suburban and residential areas. In summer, skunks feed primarily on grasshoppers, crickets, yellow jackets and beetles. They also are fond of fruits. Mainly nocturnal, skunks search for food along the borders of woodlands, fence rows, creek or marsh edges, farmlands and lawns. They will dig small holes in gardens and tear up patches

of turf looking for beetle grubs and other soil insects. Occasionally, skunks may set up housekeeping under a house, tool shed or other structure. If they tangle with dogs or are hit on the road, they release their characteristic odor.

Control: To discourage skunks from digging up the yard, apply a recommended chemical control to reduce the number of soil insects. To prevent skunks from making a den under a building, seal off all foundation openings with wire mesh. Do this when the animals are not at home. To live-trap a skunk, bait it with sardines or cat food. Use a box trap; then cover it with a cloth to move it.

Slugs

Slugs, close relatives of snails, are unsightly pests in many gardens and greenhouses. Slugs damage plants with their feeding, often completely destroying seedlings. As they move, they leave an unsightly slime trail on plants and walkways. Crushed on walks and driveways, they can be an unsightly, malodorous mess. Instead of a shell, slugs have a smooth mantle, which is the raised area above the front part of the body. Slugs common to Delaware may vary in length from 1/4 inch to 3 or more inches. The mouthparts are hard and work like a rasp. Eyes are on tentacles above the mouthparts. All slugs need damp, humid conditions for development. In the day, they hide from sun and wind. During severely dry conditions, they can burrow several inches into the soil.

Control: Sanitation improves slug control. A simple, effective trap for slugs is a group of stones, bricks, or boards 6 inches square or larger, placed around the garden or under greenhouse benches. Check the boards and destroy hiding slugs daily. Slugs avoid crawling over dry or dusty materials such as lime, road dust, cinders, gravel, or sand. The excessive secretion of mucus needed to free itself from these materials soon leads to exhaustion and death. Barriers also can be effective--a 4-inch wide strip of fly screen, placed on edge and partially embedded in the soil, keeps slugs out of gardens. There are some slug poison baits on the market; be careful not to poison dogs or other animals.

Snakes

What common wild animal causes the most fear, frustration, and even frenzy? A snake! Almost all snakes in Delaware are non-poisonous. All snakes are predators. They eat a wide variety of foods, including insects, worms, small rodents, young birds and birds' eggs, frogs, toads, salamanders and other snakes. Snakes are especially valuable in the garden where they destroy many pests. Snakes live in a variety of habitats, from swamps to rocky, wooded slopes. In general, they like cool, damp, dark areas where they can hide and find food. The most effective control measure is to reduce the amount of habitat attractive to snakes. This might include a wood pile, rock pile, various accumulations of debris, an unmowed lawn, untended shrubbery and tangles of vegetation.

Control: To discourage snakes, keep your yard and garden neat and tidy. Occasionally, a snake may enter a house basement or attic. If this occurs, a pile of damp rags or burlap placed on the floor along a wall may tempt the snake to hide under it. Seal all holes, cracks or other means of entry into the house. Remove food, rodents or birds nesting in the home, and snakes will leave for better hunting territory. Do not kill snakes when you encounter them. Remember

that snake are a natural and beneficial part of the environment. Although you may not learn to like them, you can learn to appreciate them.

Squirrels

Tree squirrels are among the most common and conspicuous of our wild animals. Of the three kinds of tree squirrels--gray, red and flying--the eastern gray squirrel is the most abundant in this area. From 16 to 24 inches long, including its bushy tail, the gray squirrel weighs from 3/4 to 1 2 pounds. Typically, it has gray fur on its back and whitish fur on its underside. Squirrels ordinarily inhabit wooded areas, often in close association with humans. They raise two litters of young each year--one in early spring, the other in summer. Tree cavities are preferred nesting sites, but they often nests of leaves, grass and other materials in the forks of trees. Squirrels will eat a great variety of foods, which is one reason they are pesky. Typically, they feed on fruits and nuts in fall and early winter. Acorns, hickory nuts, walnuts and osage orange fruits are favorite fall foods. They often store nuts for later use. In late winter and early spring, they prefer tree buds. In summer they eat fruits, berries, corn, mushrooms and other succulent plant materials.

These rascally rodents seem constantly at odds with gardeners and homeowners. Squirrels will not hesitate to eat your favorite garden fruits, nuts and vegetables, especially sweet corn. They will nip the twigs from trees and chew the bark from various woody plants. They continually raid bird feeders, where they steal the feed and frighten off birds. On occasion, they even enter the attics of homes, where they set up housekeeping.

Control: Sad to say, there's very little that can be done to control squirrels. They can be trapped alive. Promptly remove them and release them at least 5 miles away. Use a live trap of suitable size and bait it with nutmeats or sunflower seeds. A repellent containing thiram can be applied to the bark of susceptible trees and shrubs to discourage gnawing. Special baffles on bird feeders may keep hungry squirrels from the feed. To reduce squirrels jumping onto feeders, cut back shrubbery from feeding areas. A heavy application of moth flakes may temporarily repel the animals from attics and other enclosed spaces; seal openings squirrels use to enter the house. If all else fails, sit back, relax and enjoy the squirrels' antics; at least they are interesting to watch.

Voles

Voles, also called meadow mice and meadow voles, are small, stocky rodents, measuring about seven inches long at maturity. They have short legs, short tails, small eyes, partly hidden ears and chisel-like front teeth. Adults are chestnut brown in color, mixed with black on the back; their underparts are dark grey, and their feet are brown. Voles usually eat grasses and herbs, but will also feed upon seeds, bulbs and roots. They can damage trees and shrubs during winter when they gnaw off tender bark. If the gnawing girdles the tree, it may die. Voles make an extensive network of surface runways, especially in dense cover; they also tunnel underground.

Control: The best control is to keep the yard and garden neat and trimmed. Mow regularly to keep weeds and other unwanted vegetation down in areas around shrubs and trees. Avoid using heavy mulches, and don't allow drifts of wind-blown leaves and other litter to accumulate.

Anticoagulant baits, like Warfarin, can be effective. Regular mouse snap traps may also be used. Set each trap at right angles to a visible runway, with the trigger in the runway. A pinch of oatmeal makes an effective bait. You can protect the trunks of young trees from vole damage with tree guard cylinders of 1/4-inch mesh hardware cloth. (See [HYG - 62, Vole Identification and Control](#), for more information.)