

Friend or Foe

In nature and in our gardens, we have complex relationships with the creatures around us. Insects, animals and plants all sometimes get the label of “good” or “bad” when the reality is, they can be both simultaneously. When it comes to animals, our tolerance for interaction is much lower in and around our homes. Do all animals deserve an outright ban from our gardens or are there times we can cohabitate peacefully?

Woodchucks

Woodchucks, or groundhogs, are one of the most common wildlife calls I receive. Not often spotted, many people are surprised how large these burrow digging animals are. Reaching lengths between 20-27” and weighing between 5-12 lbs., a woodchuck deserves a double take. Woodchucks eat plants and fruit and this feeding can be a nuisance to homeowners. As with most wildlife, the woodchuck prefers to be left alone and will dive into its burrow whenever another animal or person approaches. They emerge from their burrow to forage for food and sunbathe—a favorite woodchuck pastime. Woodchucks are not aggressive and are not considered a threat to domestic animals or people.

Skunk

Most people know only one thing about skunks—they stink. Although it is true that a frightened or threatened skunk will spray at a potential threat, that is only one characteristic of the striped mammal. Skunks are primarily beneficial as their diet consists of insects (at least half of their diet) fruit and mice. As they forage for food, skunks may damage lawns looking for grubs and they may also choose to make their dens under porches or buildings—perhaps even in a basement. The worst and most serious problem with skunks are that they can carry rabies along with a few other diseases and parasites such as lice or fleas. For beekeepers, skunks may also try to disturb your hives. Keeping hives far off the ground with sheet metal on the legs helps keep bees out of their reach.

Opossums

Opossums are the unsung hero of North America. Our only marsupial, opossums carry their young in a pouch, just like the much-loved kangaroos and koloas. Opossums sometimes wander into homes—usually basements and garages—but are easily trapped and removed. They can spread some diseases and parasites, like the skunk, but unlike the skunk opossums do not carry rabies! Non-aggressive, the opossum is notorious for playing dead when threatened. Opossums eat ticks, cockroaches, snakes, rats and mice. They do eat some vegetation and fruit and are occasionally caught getting into trashcans and outside cat food dishes.

Woodrats

Woodrats or packrats are a rodent that builds nests in woodpiles, rock piles, brush piles, around tree bases and sometimes in tree branches. Often the calls about woodrats are after homeowners notice branches of a similar size dropping all around their trees. Woodrats use these branches to create their nests. They also gather metal, nuts, fruit, mushrooms and berries. While woodrats do not pose a major issue in a woodland or prairie setting, they become an urban wildlife issue if they decided a barn, shed, tractor or home should be their nesting site.

When it comes to urban wildlife issues, control is a complicated topic that is highly dependent on the animal and local regulations. Trapping and relocating wildlife is typically the first response to wildlife encounters but this rarely solves the issue. If the environment is conducive to one raccoon, you may remove the raccoon in question but if the habitat is not modified another will move into its place. Relocation is illegal if you do not have the permission of the landowner whose property you are taking the animal to and relocated animals die in astonishing numbers. This is attributed to the animal's lack of knowledge about where to obtain food, water, shelter and where predators reside in this new area. Often the most humane option is euthanasia which should only be done after all other options are considered and by a trained professional.

For more information about wildlife visit our wildlife page: <https://www.ksre.k-state.edu/agriculture/wildlife/>

Regulations on hunting and trapping can be found through the Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism: <https://ksoutdoors.com/>