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Controlling Raccoon Damage in Urban Areas

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Abstract: Raccoons have become a serious problem in many urban and suburban areas. Damage to homes and buildings as well as the spread of diseases to pets are constant problems when high raccoon populations occur. Various control methods can be implemented with positive results.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, problems associated with raccoons in urban areas have become serious and very costly. This is due primarily to trends in real estate development and the human expansion into once rural areas. The idea of blending homes and office buildings into the natural surroundings is pleasant to the eye, but it can be an open invitation to the opportunistic raccoon.

Problems caused by raccoons can range from being a simple nuisance in the backyard to extreme structural damage to buildings, including holes in roofs and ceilings and damage to air conditioning systems and electrical wiring. Total monetary value of damage to buildings and other property in Texas for 1987 was $100,901.00. This figure represents only the damage reported to our agency. (Annual Report, 1987)

Another problem linked to raccoons is the spread of diseases to pets. Recently a study was conducted by Texas A&M University and the Austin area Health Department to test for leptospirosis in urban raccoons. Raccoons were collected in Austin, Texas by the Texas Animal Damage Control Service. The findings indicated that 61% of the raccoons tested positive for leptospirosis (Hudson, 1987). Dogs and cats are not vaccinated against this particular strain of the disease; therefore exposure to pets could increase the incidence of leptospirosis in people and pets.

Rabies is another disease that can be spread by raccoons. The national Centers for Disease Control received 1,311 cases of raccoon rabies in 1987. Of these, 1,298 (99%) were reported from the mid-Atlantic and southeaster states; areas of extreme urban development (CDC Summaries, 1988).

PROBLEM CIRCUMSTANCES

In most instances reports of raccoon damage are received from homeowners and businesses that are located within two or three blocks from a stream or green belt area. These natural corridors provide travel lanes by which raccoons are permitted to move throughout a city. Water, food, and shelter are available, depending on the amount of vegetation present. Usually there is not sufficient food or shelter for the local population of raccoons and during dry seasons, water can be in short supply. This lack of food, water, and or shelter, all essential elements, are the reasons why raccoons intrude upon people in urban areas.

DESCRIPTION OF RACCOON COMPLAINTS AND SOLUTIONS

The Texas Animal Damage Control Service provides assistance for various urban wildlife problems. The following are the most common complaints associated with raccoons.

1. Raccoons seen in the neighborhood: Many people do not realize that wildlife is abundant in urban areas, provided there is suitable habitat. In most instances this problem can be solved by providing the individual with information on urban raccoons.

2. Pet food, water, and garbage consumed by raccoons: Pet food left outside after dark and improperly stored garbage will attract raccoons to a home. Water bowls left out over night, uncovered hot tubs, and swimming pools are all easy to reach sources of water for raccoons.

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With the exception of swimming pools, all of the above mentioned attractants can be stored properly with a little effort and discipline by the property owner.

3. Raccoons in attics and chimneys: This is the most common complaint received. Serious roof and interior damage can occur when raccoons are living in an attic. Exclusion, if feasible, should be implemented as soon as the problem is discovered. A permanent physical barrier between the ground and roof must be created. Raccoons usually gain access to a structure by way of a tree trunk or limb that is within two or three feet of the roof. To determine if a tree is being used, the trunk should be wrapped with a material that will show claw marks. Plastic trash bags, newspaper, or aluminum foil are all readily available and give good results. If a tree is being used by a raccoon, the trunk can be wrapped with a band of metal sheeting. The band should be 2½ feet wide and the bottom of the metal should be placed at least 2½ feet from the ground. Once in place the raccoons are able to reach the ground, but cannot climb back up the tree. Pruning of limbs used by raccoons may be necessary.

Many times raccoons will climb up the corner of a building. If this is the case, a metal sheet at least 3 feet square should be tacked around the corner. After exclusion of raccoons is complete permanent roof repairs can be made. Chimneys if uncovered, should be secured with heavy wire screening and fastened with masonry screws.

If exclusion is not successful or economical, trapping will need to be implemented.

DIRECT CONTROL

While exclusion or removal of the attractant (food, water, and shelter) is the best approach in dealing with raccoons, many people assume that trapping is the first and best choice. It is my opinion that trapping alone is a short term solution. The probability of raccoons reinfesting a building within a few months is very high. If exclusion and trapping are used very good results can be expected.

Raccoons are not difficult to catch in traps. In urban areas, the cage-type live trap should always be used. Single door traps are more effective for larger animals. If a trap with two doors is to be used, close the rear door. Bait should be placed behind the treadle well to the back of the trap. In selecting a bait, it is not necessary to use high odor fish products. This will attract house cats and possibly raccons other than those causing the damage. Peanut butter on bread or fruit and vanilla extract on bread are effective baits.

Once a raccoon has been trapped, it must be destroyed or relocated. Many people think the animal should be placed "back in the country where it came from". The fact is urban raccoons spend their entire lives in an urban area. Raccoons that are relocated into unfamiliar surroundings are stressed, disoriented, and have never searched for food or shelter in a rural area. The spread of disease to the rural raccoon population is very possible. Many of the relocated raccoons do not live very long after release. In North Carolina, 300 raccoons were tagged and released at a cost of $50.00 per animal; of these relocated raccoons only 16% (48) survived (Boyer & Brown, 1988). Tranquilizing followed by euthanasia is a more humane solution than allowing the raccoon to suffer from stress and starvation.

CONCLUSION

Urban raccoons and the problems they cause can be found in any city whenever food, water, and shelter are available. Wildlife damage control agencies can provide the public with information to increase their awareness of this and other wildlife related conflicts. This will enable people to better understand and deal with these problems as they arise.

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