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2001

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Recommended Citation

Hadidian, J. (2001). Urban wildlife control: It starts in our own backyard. *AV Magazine*, 109(4), 20.

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Urban Wildlife Control: It Starts in Our Own Backyard

By John Hadidian, Ph.D., Director,
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The first organized effort to deal with animal welfare and protection in the United States dates from Henry Bergh's founding of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) in the mid 1860s. Although motivated by a passionate concern for the fate of draft animals, Bergh's involvement in animal protection extended to all horizons, and he was one of the first to become involved in issues relating to the welfare of wildlife. Concerns expressed to him and his organization in the 1870s over the unprincipled slaughter of the American bison led to the ASPCA petitioning Congress for help in stopping this activity. Unfortunately, while decried in many quarters in Washington, the killing was allowed to continue, largely because it was seen as an expedient way to force Native Americans onto reservations. Today, such thinking would be unimaginable. Times have changed, we're tempted to say, for the better. True in some respects, but not in all.

During Bergh's time, most people lived in rural areas and practiced a primarily agrarian lifestyle. Today, eight of every ten Americans live in cities or towns of 50,000 people or more. There are places along both east and west coasts where the very idea of 'city' has to be expanded to include the gigantic conurbations that extend across literally hundreds of miles and involve millions of people. These same places provide homes for millions of wild animals as well. Many are victims of development and displacement as humans expand their living spaces into the countryside.

Many are unrecognized victims of deliberate acts of cruelty or unthinking policies and practices that lead to unnecessary deaths. For wild animals in cities and towns, it seems we might as well be back in the times of Henry Bergh and the start of the ASPCA.

In a strange way, urban wildlife suffers from what could be called benign neglect. The state and federal agencies with authority for wild animals remain even today focused on traditional uses of wildlife (that is, primarily for consumptive purposes) and for the most part ignore urban wildlife, which usually cannot be recreationally or commercially used. A homeowner with a raccoon problem or a community with concerns about Canada geese on their soccer fields may find little more than advice or a referral elsewhere for help. The referrals often lead to an individual who traps 'nuisance' wildlife as a business enterprise. Often called nuisance wildlife control operators, or NWCOS, these individuals may have no background with wildlife beyond that gained through recreational trapping or hunting experiences. State licensing or testing for qualifications are more often absent than present, and regulations requiring humane treatment of captured wildlife are nonexistent. The traps used to 'control' nuisance wildlife are often meant to kill, and in many states thousands and even tens of thousands of animals die every year for no more offense than having assumed an uncapped chimney or hole into an attic that led to a safe haven.

Where some see killing as the only 'solution' to such 'problems,' others see

nonlethal approaches that displace the offending raccoon, squirrel, or other animal as not only preferable but, in fact, more practical. It is more often the case than not that we find the 'nuisance' animal simply moving on to an alternate den site and continuing to live her own life in a way that causes neither injury nor insult to humans. The heart of the matter concerning urban wildlife is that unnecessary and needless deaths occur all too often because people do not understand that nonlethal solutions exist. This leads to what some have called the 'plight of urban wildlife.' Misunderstanding, attitudes based on fear or ignorance, and the absence of anywhere to turn for information all combine to make a deadly situation for many of our wild neighbors.

However, there is promise within the plight. People are stepping forward to deal with the issues surrounding urban wildlife, and communities are mobilizing to resolve their problems where they can best be solved—at ground level. Wildlife rehabilitation, once a back-yard-based operation, is becoming more of a force for awareness and change. Rehabilitators and activists are working to educate urbanites about their wild neighbors and to advocate for tolerance, understanding, and humane approaches to resolving conflicts. Community-based programs such as GeesePeace™ are addressing larger and more complex issues with urban wildlife by creating positive solutions and fostering community involvement.

To achieve the goal of humane treatment for urban wildlife it will be necessary to work toward protection of animals themselves as well as the preservation of habitats that ensure they can survive. Clearly, urbanization is here to stay. Some fear it can only get worse, with more development and habitat destruction, more roads, and more alienation of people from the natural world. Others see hope as wild animals become more and more a part of urban communities. No matter which vision we have, we all share an obligation to work toward creating a humane and caring world that can sustain both people and animals. There is perhaps no more realistic way to work toward this goal than to be able to step out the door of our home and say, "We'll start here." **AV**