



Dusan Petrovic graphic

4 Making peace

Every now and then, angry city humans speak of raccoon genocide. They've done it to their own kind a number of times, which is worrisome. Why, just recently I caught a headline that declared us Toronto raccoons "Public Enemy No. 1." This — and a possibility that some politician may one day run on an anti-raccoon platform — has caused me to rethink humans. They now feel quite unpredictable, except when it comes to the handling of their garbage. In hindsight, writing of our plans to organize seems like not such a good idea. I'm regretting it, actually. But what is done is done. I think it best that we just all try to get along. Say, is that a jelly doughnut?

— Sincerely, Davy Raccoon, Toronto

It is high noon on a scorcher of a day in north Toronto and the sickly sweet odour of raccoon feces hangs in the still, humid air. Brad Gates, founder of AAA Gates' Wildlife Control, is on the top roof of a two-level home near Bayview and Sheppard Aves., which recently changed hands for \$1 million.

I'm up there with him, knees wobbling from the height and feeling like I might barf. Feces fumes waft out of a plastic roof vent to my left. The attic is full of it.

On his first call to the house, Gates says he was "overwhelmed" by the smell, and that says a lot coming from a guy who has been in the business of humanely removing wildlife for 29 years.

The new owners discovered that the house, which may have been vacant for some time, had more than a raccoon "problem."

As Gates discovered, it's an infestation, with two independent young families living within the roof. There are two access points where the roof meets the eavestrough, with shingles clawed away by the animals. About a year's worth of raccoon droppings sit on

a seam on the lower roof. There are so many feces in the attic that Gates has recommended the owners hire a company that specializes in mould removal to do that part of the job.

He pulls out his iPhone to show a picture from one of the rooms. It shows sagging plastic sheeting taped to the ceiling, full of drywall, feces and urine.

The house is a prime example of letting things go. Gates has already installed one-way exit doors at the entry points and raccoon-proofed other possible entry points. The two mother raccoons and an unknown number of kits may already be gone. When he is sure, the entry points will be sealed.

In cases where the kits are younger, Gates and his staff — he has nine trucks in Toronto, six in Vancouver — will “pop up in the attic. We use the element of surprise to get the mother to roll off the babies. We have to tread carefully, because the mother can be aggressive. In most cases, she’ll give you space, and the idea is to get the babies and get out in a hurry, then either lure her out using the babies as bait or rely on the one-way door.”

If the mother runs off, the weather is cool and the kits are not yet mobile, they’re put in a heated accessible outdoor box. Mom usually returns and moves them, one at a time, to another den location. Raccoons have multiple dens in their home ranges. When one becomes unusable, they simply move.

Gates, who has a degree in biology and is highly regarded by animal welfare advocates, estimates this job will cost the owners around \$800, not including the added cost of the cleaning company. But a typical raccoon family of one mom and her kits in the attic costs about \$400.

This house is bad, but the worst call he ever went on came in the form of a panicked 2 a.m. call from a house on the Danforth. Renters had been complaining to the landlord that they’d been hearing raccoons in the attic for quite some time. “In fact, the ceiling in

the master bedroom was beginning to get stained. So, at 2 in the morning as they lay in bed, the raccoon came over to use the area above the ceiling as its latrine, and, this time, the weight of the raccoon caused the entire ceiling to collapse onto them as they slept in bed below.

“We came over and there was just a horrendous amount of feces all over the bed, and the raccoon was sitting in the sink of the bathroom.”

There’s no information as to whether the tenants ever got over that particular nightmare. But keep in mind what a little pig’s blood spilled over the head did to Stephen King’s *Carrie*.

Here’s what any homeowner can do to prevent this from happening, courtesy of Gates. Prune tree branches that give raccoons access to rooftops. Put green waste out on the morning of collection and keep it otherwise locked up in a shed or garage. Raccoon-proof roof vents and other potential access points. At the first signs of raccoons accessing your house, call a credible professional removal company.

Gates thinks bylaws would help, including one that forbids feeding wild animals.

As for raccoon latrines, literally tread carefully and clean up and deodorize promptly. Do not allow the waste to accumulate. Roundworm eggs, shed in the millions in raccoon excrement, become infectious a month after the feces leave the raccoon’s body and are difficult to kill off. Torching is effective but not practical on flammable rooftops and decks. If you insist on doing it yourself, wear protective clothing, including a mask if the waste is dry. Shovel the feces into a doubled bag, tightly seal it and place it in regular garbage, not the green bin. Disinfect the shovel and hard surfaces with boiling water and soap. Sprinkle the area with ammonia, which may help deter raccoons from coming back. Keep on top of it if they do.

There have been two fairly recent cases in which children have become seriously ill from roundworm. In 2005, a boy in the Beach neighbourhood of Toronto became infected. It was determined he was playing in a sandbox that contained raccoon feces. A Hamilton area toddler became infected in 2008, leaving the child blind and suffering from seizures.

“I don’t want to vilify the raccoon because of the disease,” says Gates. “It gives the raccoon haters leverage to start a campaign to kill all the raccoons in Toronto, which isn’t going to do anything to solve our raccoon issue.” But, just to be certain, there is no “10-second rule” in the Gates family backyard. If food hits the ground, it never ends up in your mouth.

For those who think, or are now thinking, a good cull or moving city raccoons to the forest are solutions, think again. Neither is effective. If you create a vacuum, research has shown more raccoons will simply move in.

We have to learn to live with wildlife and ensure it is healthy, say experts.

Or, as Toronto artist Maryann Kovalski did, admire them but relieve yourself of them. She describes her relationship with raccoons as — here’s that word again — “complicated.” She moved to Toronto 30 years ago and took up residence in a house in Rosedale. “I had this really pretty pergola built at the end of our really tiny, postage-stamp garden and my husband wanted vines to grow on it right away so we planted silver lace, which was a stupid idea because it grows like crazy. And we didn’t realize it but that was a raccoon latrine.”

The couple would dine on a table beneath the poop, “and as the weeks were going by, we’re like, ‘It just smells so weird.’ We finally had to pull the table out. We couldn’t be there. And we discovered there was like a foot of it up there. We had to hire some guy who does it as his specialty and at great expense. But he was like, ‘I’ve