

Wildlife vs. the city: Can't we get along?

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Toronto's raccoon population has exploded since the advent of the green bin program, just one of several human-animal conflicts that occur regularly within the urban boundary.

BILL TAYLOR/TORONTO STAR FILE PHOTO

If there's a raccoon on your property and you want it to leave, there are better methods than hitting it with a shovel.

That was one of the messages coming out of an inaugural Toronto conference devoted to improving the way urban dwellers interact with wildlife.

"People try inhumane solutions — using rat traps for squirrels, poisons for raccoons. There are always humane alternatives," said Brad Gates, a speaker at the conference and owner of Scarborough's AAA Gates' Wildlife Management.

The problem is that most people, even city workers, aren't trained in how to properly deal with wild animals, said conference spokesperson Adrian Nelson.

Some resort to drastic measures, such as the Toronto man arrested in June and charged with beating a baby raccoon with a shovel. That, along with an increase of coyote attacks on farm animals in Ontario, has made wildlife interaction a "hot news item" in Toronto, Nelson said.

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Rather than simply killing the animals, long-term solutions, particularly eliminating their easy access to food, are more effective.

Toronto Animal Services doesn't keep track of human-wildlife confrontations. But Gates estimates Toronto's raccoon population has spiked 25 per cent since the green bin program was introduced in 2002.

"It's like one-stop shopping for a raccoon to open up that bin. It would normally take a week to forage and find that much food."

The conference, held at the Metropolitan Hotel, was organized by the Association for the Protection of Fur-Bearing Animals, a Vancouver-based non-profit group. Calls to the organization from across the country are up 20 per cent, including a flood of calls regarding beavers and coyotes. The conference was organized to explore solutions beyond short-term fixes such as trapping.

Gates said he's been doing more work involving beavers of late, so he was also present to learn from beaver experts such as Colorado's Sherri Tippie.

Tippie is a hairdresser by day but has moonlighted as a beaver relocater since 1985. She claims to have "the best record of anybody in the United States, if not the world." She finds landowners and government agencies that need the beavers for habitat restoration.

Tippie was on hand to explain ways to prevent beaver-related flooding — such as a pipe system or water-flow device — rather than the oft-preferred method of simply shooting them.

"These animals are literally a keystone species to an aquatic ecosystem. And when you shoot them, they always return," she said.

The roughly 100 attendees from across North America ranged from trappers and fur industry workers to wildlife rehabilitation workers and other wildlife advocates. Discussion topics ranged from how to lobby politicians on the treatment of wildlife to dealing with coyotes properly.



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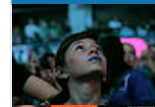
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