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TOGETHER: SPOTLIGHT

Skunks, boas, pot-bellied pigs: When it comes to critter removal, Brad Gates has been there, caught that

“Having had the opportunity to work so closely with wildlife is my dream come true,” says the president of Gates Wildlife Control.

By Tracey Tong Special to the Star
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Only four weeks old, his eyes had just begun to open, but he was already in trouble. Entangled in plastic bird netting to the degree that skin had grown over it – causing infection – the baby skunk was rendered immobile under the Toronto backyard deck where he and his family lived.

The call for skunk removal was a routine one for Brad Gates, president of Gates Wildlife Control, especially during wildlife baby season. But seeing an animal in distress never gets easier. “I feel an overwhelming desire to do everything within my power to help,” he says.

All the animals Gates removes are usually released on site, where they will still have access to known food sources and shelter opportunities and won’t have to compete with territorial animals in a new location. Since this skunk would not have survived without medical attention, Gates transferred its care to the Toronto Wildlife Centre, where it underwent surgery and was nurtured by staff. Gates continued to call the centre for updates until the now-adult skunk was released into the neighbourhood where it was found to be reunited with its family.

A wildlife control specialist since 1984, Gates services 8,000 residential and commercial properties between Hamilton to Oshawa and north to Newmarket each year. He also raises awareness for the humane treatment of undomesticated animals in urban spaces on his popular YouTube channel, Gates Wildlife Control, where he posts rescue stories. Launched in 2010, the channel has more than 100,000 subscribers and nearly 23 million views. National Geographic Channel also documented Gates and his colleagues at work in the 2006-2007 series “Animal Extractors.” “So many people living in big cities want to learn more about their wild neighbours,” he says.

As for the misunderstood skunk, Gates calls them “amazing critters.” “They are one of the most non-aggressive animals you will ever meet,” he adds. “I suppose they have been given a bad rap because when the family dog gets sprayed, it takes some effort to de-skunk Rover.” Diggers living mostly under decks and sheds, skunks are extremely nearsighted and will only spray when they feel threatened. Although many homeowners see them as a nuisance, skunks are beneficial to gardens and homes, as they feed on potentially damaging pests and rodents.

For Gates, who spent his youth exploring the ravine behind his family’s Scarborough home and graduated with a degree in biology from the University of Guelph, his company’s humane beliefs are long held. “As I began my career, it soon became evident that the vast majority of wildlife control companies performing removal services did not hold the lives of the animals in high regard,” Gates says. “Companies were setting box traps on roof tops, and when notified that an animal had been caught, they would not make it a priority to quickly release it.”

Gates’ techniques include one-way door prototypes to let the animals exit (but not re-enter) a space, and he is constantly looking for the best ways to reunite animal families outdoors. His methods are endorsed by the Ministry of Natural Resources, humane societies, municipal animal services and wildlife rehabilitators.

Gates has seen it all – removing and simultaneously filming raccoons, squirrels, bats, pigeons, hawks, owls, opossums, rabbits, groundhogs, porcupines, minks, and others for YouTube. But now and again, there are more unique calls. He’s rehomed snakes, scorpions and tarantulas left behind by former occupants; tracked down exotic birds; and recaptured three adult Japanese snow monkeys at a private zoo. He even recovered a six-foot boa constrictor that had disappeared inside a Forest Hill house, causing the homeowner to flee to a hotel, fearful that her teen son’s pet would squeeze her to death as she slept; Gates found it wrapped around a hot water radiator.

One of his most memorable rescues occurred on the way to a more routine one in Aurora. “We spotted a 300-plus-pound pot-bellied pig eating garbage at the side of the street,” says Gates. “We lured it to the back of the truck with half a stale bagel and then struggled to pick it up.” The plan worked but was poorly received. “The pig went berserk. It charged at us multiple times in the front seat as we attempted to keep it at bay with a clipboard. I am glad we don’t remove pigs on a regular basis.”

Thousands of wild animals and one angry pig later, Gates still thinks about the stinky critter who stole his heart. “Having had the opportunity to work so closely with wildlife is my dream come true,” said Gates. “Over the past 37 years, our wild neighbours have taught me so much about themselves and I feel compelled to share these experiences.”

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