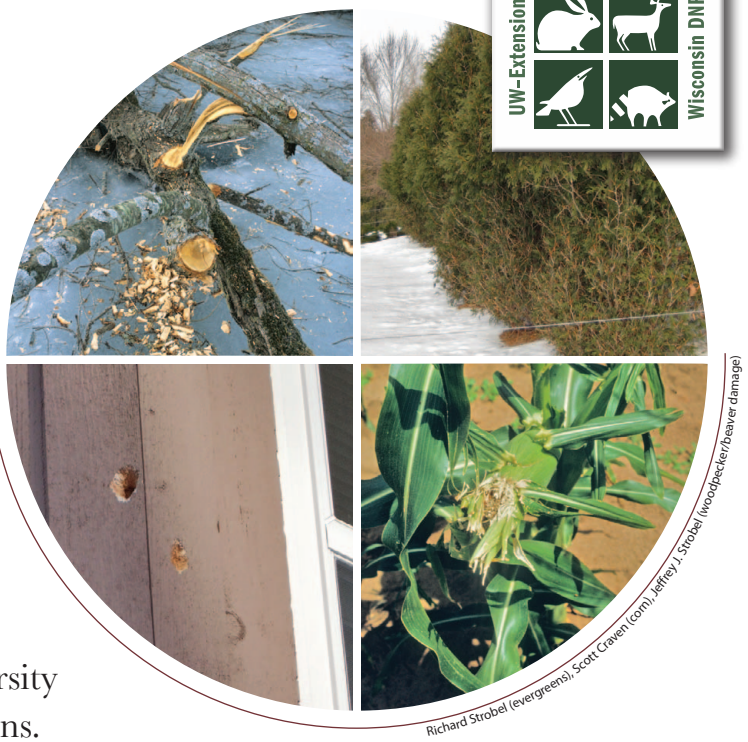
USDA Wildlife Services
UW–Extension
Wisconsin DNR

An Introduction to Wildlife Damage Management



Richard Strobel (evergreens), Scott Craven (corn), Jeffrey J. Strobel (woodpecker/beaver damage)

Keys to Success

Wisconsin is fortunate to have a great diversity of birds, mammals, reptiles, and amphibians. Attracting and observing wildlife in the home landscape can be an absolute delight and provide great personal satisfaction. However, attracting wildlife to your yard can have its downside: rabbits munch on your garden produce; squirrels invade your attic and raccoons climb down your chimney; deer collide with your car on their way back from eating the flower buds off your shrubs; and any of these animals can spread disease. Some animals even cause problems for other wildlife or damage natural resources. For example, fox, skunks, and raccoons may prey on the nests of endangered birds.

Preventing conflicts whenever possible is the best and usually least expensive option for coexisting with wildlife. For example, installing a $20 or $30 animal-proof chimney cap to keep raccoons out of a chimney is much easier (and cheaper) than trying to evict them later. Wildlife problems become increasingly difficult to solve once animals have claimed a food source, nest site, or shelter. The good news is that armed with good information and a willingness to act, most common problems with wildlife can be minimized or avoided.

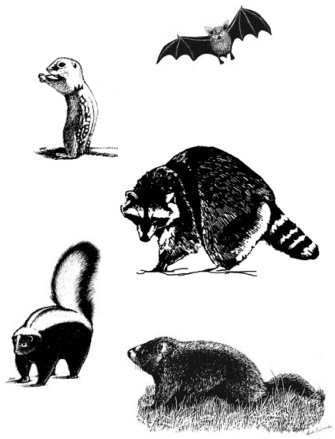
"Preventing conflicts whenever possible is the best and usually least expensive option for coexisting with wildlife."

Wild animals are highly mobile and often wary and unpredictable. Success in wildlife damage control should be measured in the reduction of a problem to a tolerable level. Complete elimination of an animal population is rarely achieved and generally not desirable.

When facing any wildlife damage or nuisance problem, several general considerations will improve your chances of successful resolution, avoid trouble with neighbors or the law, and save effort and money.

Scott Craven

IDENTIFY THE CULPRIT



Before you can come up with a defense plan, you must identify the species causing the problem. If you incorrectly identify the animal responsible, you might use an inappropriate control method, wasting both time and money.

It is rare to catch an animal in the act of causing damage. Most often, you discover the problem after the damage is done. In such cases, you must do a little wildlife detective work and examine tooth marks, browse patterns, tracks, hairs, droppings or other signs in order to determine the culprit. There are many good field guides to help with sign interpretation. Additionally, help is available from wildlife biologists at the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, University of Wisconsin-Extension county offices and publications, the United States Department of Agriculture-Wildlife Services, and others. (See *Where to Find Help* and *More Information* on pages 6-7.)

Once you've correctly identified the animal causing the damage, it is wise to learn all you can about the animal's habits. Knowing what an animal eats, where it hides and when it is active can help you in planning your strategy.

PLAN YOUR STRATEGY

Understand wildlife laws!

It is important to find out what you can and cannot do with regard to harassing, relocating, or killing any wild animal, no matter what problems or damage it may be causing. State or federal law, or both, protect the vast majority of Wisconsin wildlife, especially birds.

Permits, licenses or other forms of permission may be required, and even then some actions may never be allowed for safety, legal or ethical reasons. The fines and hassle for illegal control can be substantial.

Richard Strobel

Cedar trees with exclusion installed after deer browsing.

Wildlife laws vary from state-to-state and even within some municipalities (firearm use, for example). If you have any doubt as to the legality of planned actions, check first with your local WDNR conservation officer or a USDA APHIS Wildlife Services office.

Be sensitive to the values of others.

People have a wide range of feelings about wildlife. A serious problem for you may be a pleasure for your neighbors, or vice versa. The "bunnies" your neighbor's children feed and know by name may mean the demise of your prized spring flowers.

On a larger scale, the deer devastating your orchard by night may spend the day in your neighbor's woodlot, which he manages for trophy deer hunting. In either example, hasty control measures could lead to some serious relationship problems among neighbors.

Jeffrey J. Strobel (cranes) & http://icwdm.org (trees)

Trees damaged by porcupines (inset) and Sandhill cranes in tilled cropland.

Understand the basic tools and techniques of wildlife damage control.

Wildlife control is very different than weed or insect control. Few chemical pesticides are registered (available) for animal control and "cookbook" solutions – *apply X to Y for three days and goodbye pest* – are rare. Thus, resolution of a problem may require trial and error and the use of several of the following tools/methods in an integrated control program.

Two very important parts of an integrated wildlife damage management approach are to use randomness and diversity. Wildlife are creatures of habit and often have the same routine day after day. The more you can upset an animal's daily routine, the less likely an animal will stay in the area. You can prevent animals from feeling safe on your property by radomly employing managements methods. For example, don't always use scare tactics at the same time of the day and in the same location. Instead, randomly change how, when and where scare tactics are used.

Using more than one management method (diversifying your management approach), especially when using non-lethal tools such as scare tactics, will increase your chance for success in resolving a wildlife damage problem. An example would be to combine a scare tactic using noise with a visual scare tactic.

Randomness and diversity reduces the possibility that an animal will become accustomed to (habituate) the method you've chosen to resolve or reduce the damage problem, thereby resolving your problem as quickly and cheaply as possible.

EXCLUSION – KEEP THE ANIMAL OUT

Examples: A fence, chimney cap, wire or wooden skirt around a deck, plastic mesh net over fruit trees or berry bushes.

REMOVAL – REMOVE THE ANIMAL FROM THE AFFECTED AREA

Examples: *Alive* – capture and relocation via live trap, net, hand capture, etc. NOTE: Moving live animals around the landscape is a complicated and controversial issue. (See sidebar.) *Dead (usually a last resort)* – shooting, toxicants, kill-traps (like a wooden-base rat trap).

Non-lethal Control

In Wisconsin, it is legal to resolve most wildlife damage issues using non-lethal techniques, such as live trapping, any time of the year as long as the animal involved is not an endangered or threatened species. However, live-trapped animals cannot be relocated to Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources lands, nor can they be released on private property without the written consent of the property owner/manager. Furthermore, movement of problem animals may create problems for someone else, could spread disease or parasites, and increases stress and possible injury for the captured animal or other animals at the release site.

REPELLENTS – THE USE OF SUBSTANCES THAT SMELL OR TASTE BAD TO THE ANIMAL

Examples: Moth balls (naphthalene) in an attic, thiram or capsaicin-based repellents on landscape plants, commercial repellents sprayed on garden plants.

SCARE TACTICS – FRIGHTEN THE ANIMAL AWAY FROM THE SITE

Examples: loud noises, owl decoys, mylar or plastic streamers, "scare-eye" balloons, propane cannons, etc.

HABITAT MODIFICATION – MAKE THE AREA LESS ATTRACTIVE

Examples: Remove brush piles that harbor rabbits, mow long grass used by meadow mice (voles), eliminate nest/roost sites in buildings used by pigeons or sparrows. Be aware, however, that as you change habitat to discourage a problem animal, you may also be negatively altering habitat for beneficial wildlife.

CULTURAL CHANGES – CHANGE HUMAN BEHAVIOR

Examples: use wildlife-proof trash cans, don't feed wildlife (other than backyard birds), plant gardens using plants less likely to get damaged by wildlife.

INCREASED TOLERANCE – RETHINK THE SITUATION!

Examples: The action, sounds, and sights provided by the animal in question may be worth the hassle or loss. Conduct a cost-benefit analysis before implementing control.

Vole damage to lawn, visible after snowmelt.

Skunk eating catfood.

Spend your money wisely.

Wildlife damage management can cost almost nothing to well over $1,000. Prior to spending money on any management practice, it is wise to estimate your annual economic loss from the damage. This may include actual cost of the damaged items (for example, trees girdled by mice), their replacement cost, labor cost, and the cost of previous control efforts. This will help you decide how much you might want to spend to reduce or eliminate future damage.

The cost of various management practices does not necessarily correlate with their success rates. For example, some devices sold to scare away or exclude everything from moles to deer can be relatively expensive, but scant scientific evidence exists demonstrating their effectiveness.

Other more expensive management practices have shown success, however. Some types of deer fence, like high-tensile woven wire, can easily cost many thousands of dollars to purchase and install. While at first the price tag may shock you, once you pro-rate the cost over the life span of the fence (which can be 30 years) and realize that you can prevent most if not all deer damage once the fence is properly installed, this may become an economical option in certain situations.

Some simple methods, such as harassment, are inexpensive and generally effective, but may require quite a bit of perseverance on your part. Do not get discouraged if after 3-4 days, or even a week, persistent harassment has not caused the offending animals(s) to leave. Daily (sometimes multiple times) harassment for a 2-3 week period may be necessary. Eventually, however, the animal will get tired of the constant annoyance and will leave for a more peaceful environment.

Know Your Limits

Do-it-yourselfers may feel they can save money by extracting a family of raccoons from their chimney themselves. However, standing on a roof trying to coax a hissing, clawing, biting family of raccoons out of their lair is not for everyone. In this situation, it may be wise to pay someone with experience and expertise to solve the problem on your behalf.

A FEW FINAL THOUGHTS

With some good information, a little planning, and reliable techniques and equipment, you CAN solve most wildlife problems yourself. Always remember the considerations that we have previously mentioned and rely on proven techniques. Gadgets and gimmicks may seem attractive, especially as solutions for very frustrating problems, but they rarely meet expectations.

Also, remember that complete elimination of a given animal population is unlikely and undesirable. Strive for "peaceful coexistence" with the wildlife that shares your space.

http://icwdm.org

Bat guano in attic with damaged screen.

"The cost of various management practices does not necessarily correlate with their success...some devices sold to scare away or exclude everything from moles to deer can be relatively expensive, but scant scientific evidence exists demonstrating their effectiveness."

WHERE TO FIND HELP

University of Wisconsin–Extension – provides a wealth of information through County educators, State Specialists, Master Gardener Training, and a wide variety of media/publications on wildlife management.

Visit UW-Extension publications at http://learningstore.uwex.edu

USDA APHIS Wildlife Services – responsible for most agricultural/commercial wildlife damage situations in Wisconsin; administers the Wisconsin Wildlife Damage Abatement and Claims Program.

State office – Sun Prairie, 866-4USDAWS (487-3297)

District offices – Rhinelander (1-800-228-1368) and Waupun (1-800-433-0688). These offices maintain toll-free animal damage hotlines during normal business hours.

Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources – houses the Wisconsin Wildlife Damage Claims Program, but field work is handled by USDA APHIS Wildlife Services staff as noted above. Local WDNR offices/service centers can provide information on programs and local wildlife managers are familiar with wildlife identification, population status, and local issues. WDNR conservation officers are the authority when it comes to the legality of any proposed control action.

Visit the WDNR online at www.dnr.state.wi.us

Private Contractors – A few national pest control firms offer limited assistance with wildlife problems.

In addition, there are numerous individuals with expertise in trapping and wildlife who will remove problem animals. The Wisconsin Trappers Association (www.wistrap.org) publishes a list of members who offer wildlife control services. Other groups/individuals specialize in household bat control, urban goose or deer removal, and other difficult problems.

Jeffrey J. Strobel

Apple tree branch gnawed by rabbit.

Any private contractor should prove they are insured, and you may want to ask for references to check on the quality of their work prior to hiring.

MORE INFORMATION

Handbook of wildlife damage management:

Prevention and Control of Wildlife Damage, (chapters on every possible wildlife problem, pesticide information, sources of supply) available as hard copy or CD-ROM: 202 Natural Resources Hall, University of Nebraska, Lincoln NE 68583-0819 or online at http://icwdm.org

USDA APHIS Wildlife Services/Wisconsin:

Sun Prairie – 866-4USDAWS (487-3297) Waupun – 1-800-433-0688 Rhinelander – 1-800-228-1368

Field guides:

The Peterson Field Guide Series (Birds, mammals, etc) for species identification.

Mammal Tracks and Sign: A Guide to North American Species and *Bird Tracks and Sign: A Guide to North American Species* by Mark Elbroc

Internet:

The Internet Center for Wildlife Damage Management (icwdm.org) offers scientifically based information on wildlife damage management. The Internet Center for Wildlife Damage Management is a cooperative effort among Cornell University, Clemson University, the University of Nebraska, and Utah State University.

An Introduction to Wildlife Damage Management

Keys to Success

This fact sheet is part of a series designed to help you successfully manage wildlife damage problems on your property. Other publications in this series focus on controlling damage from specific animals.

This publication is available in pdf format at: wildlifedamage.uwex.edu

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An Introduction to Wildlife Damage Management – Keys to Success G3997-002 I-02-2012

Graphic design by Jeffrey J. Strobel,
UW-Extension Environmental Resources Center.

UW Extension Cooperative Extension

Wisconsin Dept. of Natural Resources

USDA United States Department of Agriculture
Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service
Wildlife Services