



MAKE HABITAT A HABIT

OPOSSUM A DAY KEEPS BUGS AWAY

By Barbara Caswell



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Northern California is beloved for its pastoral beauty, and it just isn't country without wildlife. Sadly, as human beings have moved from outdoor occupations to office work, they've become less knowledgeable about the animals with which they share their world.

From a historical standpoint, our space became heavily populated very recently, and is becoming so densely built up that animal populations among us, while not legally "endangered," are thinning or restructuring their normal environmental roles. We will need to take a protective role toward our animals if our "country living" is to continue.

TIPS FOR PEACEFUL CO-EXISTENCE WITH LOCAL ANIMAL SPECIES:

- *Don't trap wild animals, even with a humane trap, unless there is a positive reason to do so.*

Relocation laws are constantly changing, and an animal may not survive the move to a new area with no den to hide in and strange competitors. When one critter is removed, it simply creates a job opening for another animal just like it, and wildlife experts say that humans create their own problems by leaving pet food out and building dark, inviting crawl spaces. You can't trap every animal in the world, so try to solve the root problem.

Our faithful pets are also non-native predators, so try to think of your yard as a timeshare, with you and your family splitting the use of your property with those native visitors who will inevitably arrive after dark.

- *Keep your pets in at night after you feed them dinner, or give your dog a safe walk before bed on a long leash.*

In the darkness, pets get hit by cars, cats get into fights and dogs get into confrontations with wild animals. Most "skunkings" happen late at night, and are preventable. Old-time farmers used to put their chickens into the henhouse at sundown, and they knew what they were doing!

Opossums and raccoons have forced themselves to come a little closer to man, but only to get a little closer to man's open garbage cans.



PHOTO © BARBARA CASWELL

Striking fear in the hearts of earwigs everywhere, the humble opossum cleans your garden while you sleep.

● *All forms of life should be valued as part of the natural balance of our environment, and are best left unmolested.* Many of these animals are thought of as “pests,” even though they may balance other populations, such as rodents. The much abused opossum is not a rodent but a marsupial, is not prone to rabies and is an excellent garden vacuum, removing insects, reptiles, snails and rodents from the garden at night. Skunks have much the same diet. Squirrels keep woodsy areas thick with growth, as they forget many of the hidden nuts they bury.

Make it a policy in your household that your yard belongs to you and your family in the daytime, and to the natural world at night.

MORE PEACEFUL TIPS:

- *Keep your pet population reasonable in size to prevent wiping out natural populations.* Your dogs should be under control, either with a leash or with training. Keep all pets up to date on vaccinations, and feed your pets indoors, or you are putting bait out for wild animals. And for the good of all living things, don't use rodent poisons in the garden, since poisons can travel up the food chain.
- *Keep crawl spaces securely screened off.* Wildlife has a place in the Bay Area, but that place need not be under your house. Wild animals are attracted to small, dark, quiet places, so don't create those places unless you want new roommates.
- *Rabies is not a common threat, but it can be deadly, so it is wise to be prudent.* Contrary to myth, wild animals do sometimes come out in the daytime, but an adult wild animal easily approached by humans is definitely a danger sign, especially if it seems disoriented. Don't risk getting bitten and report all bites. Modern rabies shots are tiny, ordinary injections, not the painful abdominal shots of the past.
- *Do provide habitat with water, but don't provide food for wild animals.* Providing extra food just creates more wild babies than their environment will be able to support, so let them find their own food naturally.



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“Annie,” a tiny orphan cared for by Sonoma County Wildlife Rescue, makes her first attempt to climb. Raccoons, like squirrels and opossums, are able to climb downwards by twisting their rear ankles, unlike cats, who can only climb easily upwards.

Barbara Caswell, the owner of *Designs of the Times*, is the Sonoma County home and garden designer who created Haverfield Park. Her home is a nostalgic country estate with a showcase quality house in a private natural setting.

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