

COMMUNITY★ST

How to coexist with local wildlife

Animal control expert says most often the best thing humans can do to live peacefully with their animal neighbors is let nature take its course



DONNA VICKROY

My neighbor knocked at my door one recent evening to announce there was a baby coyote in her backyard. She didn't know what, if anything, she should do.

I wasn't much help in the advice department but I did know one thing, I should grab the good camera.

The small gray creature kept darting in and out of the brush along the far edge of her property. Our yards back up to a wetlands, a home to turtles, ducks, egrets and, on occasion, coyotes.

I took several shots with the zoom before the canine disappeared into the trees. It seemed to be alone, perhaps abandoned by its pack. I wondered if it was sick or if its mother had been killed.

We went on with our evenings.

A ferocious storm blew through overnight and in the morning, my dog dragged me to the far corner of our yard. I casually glanced over our 3-foot picket fence and saw the baby coyote's dead body lying

at the edge of my neighbor's property. There were no signs of foul play and in my very unprofessional estimation I put the cause of death at either starvation or some kind of illness, possibly mange.

I posted pictures to my Facebook page. While many people were, like me, saddened that the animal had died, it soon became evident that most, me included, had no idea what to do should a wild animal die on your property.

So, I left a message at Tinley Park Animal Control. While I waited to hear back, we buried the animal along the edge of our yard.

Later, AC Officer Kim Tessmann returned my call and told me we should have disposed of the coyote, carefully, by double-bagging its corpse and tossing it in the trash. Who knew?

I asked Tessmann how frequently she gets these kinds of calls.

"All the time," she said.

Tessmann, who has a background in trapping, exterminating, running a kennel and criminal justice, does not retrieve dead animals from private property. Sometimes, she said, people get upset about that. People get upset about other things, too. They don't understand that, often, laws dictate the extent of her involvement.

So I invited Tessmann, who



GARY MIDDENDORF/DAILY SOUTHTOWN PHOTOS

Tinley Park Animal Control Officer Kim Tessmann is greeted by Ollie, a 1-year-old shepherd mix up for adoption at PAWS Animal Shelter.

has three kids, five dogs and three cats, to sit down and spell out the kinds of things humans should know to be better neighbors to the creatures that roam our suburban wild kingdom. Though Tessmann's jurisdiction is limited to Tinley Park, much of her advice is universal.

Nurturing nature

Like many south suburbs, Tinley Park is home to a variety of wildlife: Foxes, deer, coyotes, falcons and, yes, even mink. And it's safe to say, those animals not only don't understand man-made boundaries, they have little respect for them. They were, after all, here first.

But, Tessmann said, there are ways to encourage humans and wildlife to coexist peacefully and, much of the time, she said, that simply means letting nature take its course.

People move to wooded suburbs because they want to

be near nature, Tessmann said. But often, the minute nature crosses their property line, they're either taking the creature under their wing or are on the phone with animal control.

"Half the population wants to kill wildlife," she said. "The other half wants to save it."

Tessmann tries to keep the peace among humans while protecting the creatures that need protecting.

"A lot of people have good intentions," she said. "But kindness to animals pretty much dictates that they be left alone."

If we really want them to stay on their own turf, she said, "we really need to start protecting the woods, marshes and prairies where these animals live naturally."

Still, issues arise and Tessmann offers both solutions and advice.

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Animal control expert suggests hands-off approach

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She said calls to her office — a small cubby inside PAWS Animal Shelter and a van stacked with cages, nets, toys and old laundry baskets — vary year to year, season to season. This year, she said, skunks are dominating.

Trapping

“I have almost all my traps out right now for skunks,” she said.

One way people can keep skunks at bay, she said, “Treat your lawn for grubs. They’re the No. 1 food for skunks. And they will dig up your yard to get them.”

As a general rule, she said, she does not trap for animals in the area unless they’re sick or injured and seen on a regular basis or unless they’re living under somebody’s cement pad or shed.

“Per the law, some animals that are trapped are deemed for euthanasia,” she said. It’s far better to encourage the animal to move on, she said.

Coyotes

“From time to time, I get calls that coyotes are in the area but I

explain to people that we are not going to do anything, not going to remove them, not going to kill them, not going to shoot them,” Tessmann said. “Because doing that would only increase the population. A death creates a vacuum and the coyotes tend to overcompensate. They will purposely fill that void in two to three weeks.”

Citing Bob Bluett of the Department of Natural Resources, Tessmann said, “Coyote reduction has not worked in 250 years and it’s not likely to work now or in the future.”

There is a misconception that raccoons and coyotes never come out during the day, that if they’re spotted in the morning or afternoon, something must be wrong, she said.

“People say, ‘It must have rabies.’ No, it doesn’t. Nocturnal animals can be out on a beautiful day, too,” she said.

Babies booming

“I get a lot of calls that a rabbit’s nest has been abandoned in someone’s backyard. No, it has not been abandoned. Mom only comes one time a day, in the wee hours be-

cause she doesn’t want to keep tracking her scent to the nest or predators will follow it,” she said.

Yes, rabbits do tend to nest in the middle of yards, often where people have dogs, she said.

“I tell people to put a basket over the nest during the day. Put a brick on it to keep it secure and to keep the dog out. Then at night, remove the basket, put the brick in the bottom, so the mother can return to the nest,” she said.

It may be an inconvenience but, she added, the bunnies will be gone soon.

Tessmann has three words for people concerned about baby deer encroaching on their property.

“Leave. Them. Alone. There have been many serious injuries and some fatalities in other jurisdictions from mother deer beating up people who thought they were rescuing a baby deer,” she said.

In general, she said, baby animals that appear to be abandoned usually aren’t. A mother deer will leave her babies in the area, sometimes in a resident’s yard, thinking it will be safe there while she goes off and forages. She’ll come back later, she said, make a braying noise and the animal will go meet its mother.

Ducks

“I am not allowed by law to remove, relocate or addle (pour oil on duck eggs or nests). So, I advise residents to let them run their course,” she said.

If you don’t want ducks to come back, put spiked things in the ground where they tend to nest. They’ll get the hint, she said.

Same for ducks in the pool. “I tell people put floaties in the pool and they won’t be able to land,” she said.

And don’t feed bread goods to ducks, Tessmann said. “I can’t stress that enough.”

“That causes angel wings to form, their flight wings and feathers start to turn up. When that happens, they cannot fly and will not be able to escape predators,” she said.

Bats in belfries and alcoves

If bats take a liking to the alcove by your front door or your attic, fill the area with Mylar balloons, Tessmann said. They will return a bat’s sonic signal with the news that the place is occupied.

“And then they will go away,”

she said.

Tessmann does not go into attics.

“I tell people if they’ve got wildlife in their rafters or attics, light it up and run an AM talk radio for 24–48 hours. They’re there because it’s dark and it’s quiet. If those conditions no longer exist, they’re going to move on.”

Same for birds’ nests. If birds have a habit of returning to a particular area, such as your grill or doorway, you can fill the spot with rags soaked in ammonia. “They won’t come back,” she said.

Put away the welcome mat

Ways to keep wildlife out: Secure garbage cans or put them in the garage; put chicken wire around raised sheds; pick up fruit that falls from trees; clean your grill pan; trim shrubs.

“We’re building on their area, developing on their natural habitat, so they’re looking for a place to go,” she said. “If you make it easy for them, they’ll take you up on the offer.”

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