

Pest Control

It is estimated that 40-50% of our world food supply is ruined by pests. They can damage homes, trees and other personal property. Also rodents, particularly white footed and deer mice, are known to carry diseases such as hanta virus and Lyme disease. Fleas associated with rodents can carry disease such as the plague and can be a particular problem around prairie dog habitat (which we have). We are fortunate to have a fairly small number to contend with at Wildwood. For example, we don't have skunks, snakes, raccoons (yet) and we have small populations of the more common pests such as rats and mice. However we do have a number of pests that cause considerable damage that we should take steps to minimize.

Some pests are a nuisance while others can cause considerable damage to our property and have a disease carrying potential. I have been more concerned with the latter but nuisance pests cannot be ignored.

Porcupines have caused us more actual property damage than any other rodent. They have "ringed" numerous small trees on my property even though I have completely fenced the property with a net fence. I caught a large adult crawling under the gate once. When a porcupine gnaws off the bark (cambium layer) completely around the trunk or branch, it cuts off the sap supply and will completely kill the vegetation beyond the ring. I had a ponderosa pine at least 40 years old about twenty feet away from the southeast side of my deck. It was about 25 feet high and in a perfect location. A porcupine ringed the trunk about 10 feet above the ground. The top two thirds of the tree died and I had to remove it. I have a number of older trees that have had the tops ringed over the years and now are flat topped and ugly. I see numerous "shiners" on branches around the entire subdivision. One of our neighbors dog got so many quills in its muzzle and throat that it had to be put down. That is a caution to everyone.

I have checked on how to control porcupines with the Colorado Division of Wildlife. They don't have a specific eradication program like noxious weeds, for example. They do acknowledge that they are a problem. I followed two DOW employees into Hartsel a few years back and followed them into the store. I ask them what kind of control measures that they would recommend. One said to get a wire trap and use salt as bait. The other one got me off to the side and said that shooting them with a 22 caliber rifle was the best remedy. Firearm use is prohibited in the subdivision and is becoming increasingly more dangerous as our population grows. I don't know what the official rules are regarding a pellet gun but I have killed several of them on my property with mine. They seem to migrate down out of the national forest. Several years ago, two of my neighbors in filing four, the caretaker, and myself, and maybe some others, had almost eliminated them from the subdivision. We used to go on "porcupine patrol" just at dusk around our property and along our roads. Culverts are a favorite shelter. Piles of

droppings at the culvert entrances are a tell tale sign. The porcupine population in the subdivision has increased in recent years and they are again doing considerable damage.

I bought a very good wire trap on the advice of the DOW. I have used various vegetables and bags of salt for bait. The only things that I have managed to trap are rabbits and pack rats. My current research indicates that soaking a sponge with very salty water is recommended as "the best bait." It has not worked for me and I am leery of attracting them onto my property. We freeze homemade ice cream frequently with ice water and coarse salt. Several years ago I poured the salt water out on the ground and within a week or so I got a five foot tree ringed by the house that I had nurtured from a seedling. I now pour our salt water in our fire ring and burn over the top of it. Your help and advice on this problem would be appreciated.

I have had numerous problems with pack rats, also known as wood rats. I have referred to them in some of my previous articles. They can cause a real stinking mess with their nests. We have had to sweep their droppings off the deck for years. One fall I noticed that my Pfizer plants were being stripped. I couldn't imagine what could be the cause. In the spring I went to use my BBQ grill. It was literally crammed full of Pfizer branches. What a mess. I couldn't imagine how a rat could climb through the small one inch crack where the grill attached to the pipe base. Another year they built a nest between my wood-box that is on my deck and the outside wall of my house. It stunk awful. It took hours to clean up the mess and scour the residue off the wall. Another neighbor had a pack rat build a nest in the large pot and pan drawer in the bottom of their range.

The DOW recommended that the best bait for pack rats was peanut butter laced with bird feed. I have killed numerous packrats with large snap traps using that method. I have learned that you have to attach a heavy weight to the traps or they will pack them off.

Gophers can also cause damage beyond digging holes in your yard. A good friend and neighbor went to start his pickup to go home one Sunday night and it wouldn't start. He found that gophers had chewed through and damaged several of his spark plug wires. They did considerable damage to our buried electrical wires that serve the trailer pads and aerators. We had to replace that wire at considerable cost. So beware if you have a sizeable gopher population around or on your property.

I have had a large woodpile for years. I frequently encountered nests of pack rats, deer mice, squirrels and rabbits. I knew that I was harboring the very rodents that I was trying to eliminate. So I finally got smart in 2008, after 28 years, and built a rat and mouse proof wood storage-house. That has solved my problem. I haven't seen a sign of a pack rat since. My neighbors may not appreciate it however, and may have seen an increase in their own rodent population since they just left my property and went somewhere else.

Rodents should be a particular concern when winterizing your homes and RV's. Field mice and pack rats are ubiquitous at Wildwood. They can slip through any hole down to quarter size and from experience can do considerable damage over a winter. One year I found a large nest of

mice around my RV water pump and tank. We have tried many things to plug holes. Caulk if you can. However, some holes can't be plugged permanently. Slide outs on RVs nearly always have small cracks that let in the rodents. The best way to stop this is to plug up any known or suspected cracks with steel wool. Take a light after dark and shine up in suspected areas either from the outside or inside with someone observing from the inside or outside. Under the dashboard of motor homes are particularly difficult.

The two primary means to control these rodents by intervention is through chemical and physical means. Poison food such as D-CON, poison wheat and other poison rat pellets are dangerous to other wildlife (including birds), domestic animals and children. Rats, mice and chipmunks have storage pouches in their cheeks and carry most of their food back to their burrows and nests. Then you have the problem of odors. When I tore my insulated generator housing down, I found that the insulation was literally filled with dead mice and chipmunks. Not good! I now keep every scrap picked up that looks like it would be good nest material.

Our wildlife can be entertaining and exciting to watch. However, we have to remember that our animals can also be dangerous and do damage. I talked to the State Department of Wildlife personnel at the State Fair. They confirmed what most of us know but don't take as serious as we should. Wildlife activity is generally in search of food. Mice, chipmunks, squirrels, packrats and yes, black bears, are attracted to our bird feeders. Bird feeders should be mounted on very sturdy poles and at least ten feet high. Garbage should always be sealed, should never be left out and either burned or carried away when we leave.

On the bottom line, the best way to control pests is to eliminate their favorite habitat and their diet source. Our woodpiles, homes, storage sheds, and RVs are favorite habitats. Removing trash and decaying wood piles will help. Good sanitation is one of our best defenses. It is easier to spot potential problems if our homes are clean and uncluttered inside and outside. Seal all possible entry points. Areas where pipes, cables and wires enter walls and soffits should be sealed completely. Larger mesh should be placed over vent holes. Chimneys are the largest single opening into a house. Consider using chimney caps or wire mesh. We found a live blue bird totally covered with old ashes and soot in our wood stove once. We opened the doors, turned off the inside lights and turned the outside lights on. The bird flew out after bouncing off a couple of walls. Faye wasn't pleased with the clean-up of that incident. We now have a chimney guard on.

Eliminating their food source is another matter. We should all pay extra attention to burning and hauling away our trash. Most of us enjoy watching our birds. Our bird feeders attract mice, rats, squirrels and bears. We can "bear proof" our feeders and put squirrel guards on the feeder poles. However, the birds sort through and flip out undesirable seeds onto the ground. The base of the bird feeder becomes the best rodent attractor around. This dichotomy presents a major challenge that I don't have all of the answers to.

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