

Close Encounters of the Critter Kind

If your home is a B&B for wild animals, try these humane exclusion methods

The White House wasn't the only place with unexpected guests in the Washington, D.C., area last year. For two days in August, a homeowner on the outskirts of the nation's capital entertained some surprise visitors of her own, albeit in a less grand location: her closet.

More like wallflowers than political party crashers, these weary travelers were as mystified as their host, who'd first heard their dubious debut in the form of scratching in the bedroom of her northern Virginia home.

Connecting the sounds with the skunks she'd recently seen and smelled in her yard, Laura Bachman turned to the phone book but was disheartened to see companies that promised to trap and remove them—a virtual death sentence. Around the country, such services unnecessarily kill untold numbers of wild creatures or relocate them to new territories, where they face slim chances of survival.

"I like animals, and I didn't want to see anything that would harm them," says Bachman, a high school French teacher and mother of three. "And I didn't want my little girls to see something like that."

Their Lives Exposed: Bachman sprinkled flour outside her front stoop, the site of the skunks' suspected initial den. No pawprints appeared, a bad sign: The animals were trapped.

By then, Bachman was waiting for a visit from The HSUS's Humane Wildlife Services, which provides homeowners with nonlethal solutions to wildlife conflicts. Worried that her guests would become dehydrated in the meantime, she barricaded her bedroom closet, cut a small hole in the drywall, and placed cat food nearby. "I just needed to get to them to see what was going on and get them help," she says.

Soon enough, she saw the telltale black and white fur of one animal after another poking through the hole. There were four skunks in all—a mother with three babies, mirroring Bachman's own family. For the next two days, they played in the closet during feeding time. "They were really cute," says Bachman of the baby skunks. "They acted like kittens."

Though Bachman's visitors were now clearly on her official guest list, there's no question she'd issued an informal invitation long before, however inadvertently. It doesn't take much to become an unwitting host: A raccoon can fit through a 4-inch hole; a squirrel, a 2-inch opening; and a mouse, a gap the size of a nickel.

Tracing Their Downfall: In the case of the skunks, Bachman can blame it on the rain—and an opening in the house's foundation. During late summer's wet weather, she surmises, the skunks moved further back in their den under the front stoop, perhaps seeking drier shelter. But they took an Alice-in-Wonderland-style dive more than 3 feet down and could not escape, forced to follow the crawl space to other parts of the house in search of a way out.

"Animals don't normally go up to a house and start gnawing their way in," says HWS director John Griffin. "They exploit weaknesses and vulnerabilities or openings that already exist. They're very opportunistic—they're looking for a way to lower the energy they have to expend in order to survive."

Encroaching winter weather can encourage animals to seek shelter in structures, but breeding season in late winter and early spring also spurs a beehive of activity, as they begin looking for safe nesting spots.

Calling in Security: Of course, it's best if the situation never gets to that point. Prevention methods not only keep animals out but protect homes from escalating damage. "If you aren't keeping tabs on your house's maintenance," says Griffin, "you can be sure the animals are."

To rescue the skunk family, Griffin crawled inside the void behind the wall and under the stairs, herded the babies into boxes, and carefully shepherded the mom into her own box. After closing up the nearby opening in the house's foundation, he released the skunks back into their cozy den under the front stoop.

No more critters crawl Bachman's walls, but she's grateful for the experience—and for the story of interspecies diplomacy she can now tell. Thanks to the *moufette* family who crashed her closet to find a stately dinner of canned cat food, she says, "all my students now know the French word for 'skunk.'"

Up to 80 percent of the calls received by The HSUS's Humane Wildlife Services are the preventable result of easy access to unsealed cracks and crevices in homes. Follow these tips to detect and repair entry points, but first make sure no animals are already holed up inside. Loosely plug gaps with paper or cloth; check a few days later to see if the filling has been disturbed. If a critter has taken up residence, call a professional service like HWS to have her safely and humanely evicted. If not, plug the hole more permanently. Keep an eye on maintenance, as building materials deteriorate over time and new animals move into the neighborhood.

1. Roof

The roof is attractive to animals such as mother squirrels, with its promise of access to the insulation and dark, cozy nooks found in attics—dens more luxurious than any found in nature. Places where the roof intersects with another roofline or other building elements can be vulnerable. Check for deteriorating trim board, loose or damaged shingles, and holes. HWS recently rescued a trapped possum who'd entered an attic through a gap where the roof sheathing meets the trim board behind the gutter. "He was in the tightest possible space," says HWS director John Griffin. Though a siding company had come by to fix the opening after the homeowner saw it, no one realized at the time that they were sealing in an animal—an all-too-common occurrence.

2. Trees

Though animals sometimes climb downspouts or brick sides of a house, trees can also serve as a gateway onto the roof. Trimming branches so they're at least 6 feet away from the structure curbs this problem and, more importantly, protects the roof from damage that could create new entryways, says Griffin. "A small sapling branch scraping across the roof can flip up a shingle enough that the shingle just breaks. A larger branch can damage the roofline. Then you have a place where water can infiltrate, and an opening develops over time."

3. Window Wells

Inexpensive clear plastic covers can keep wandering animals out of window wells, says John Hadidian, director of The HSUS's Urban Wildlife program. "They insulate to keep the warmer air in the window well," he says, "and they prevent animals like skunks from falling in there and getting stuck." The covers should be replaced every few years.

4. Porch

The space beneath an elevated porch can make a cozy shelter, especially during birthing season. Inspect the foundation and any windows located under the porch or deck, and repair as needed. Also consider reinforcing any latticework protecting this area with a heavy-duty screen: L-shaped, 1-by-1-inch galvanized welded wire attached to the porch. For surefire protection, extend it 12 inches into the ground—and 12 inches away from the porch—to prevent the more determined animals from digging around it.

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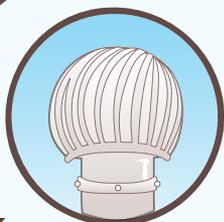
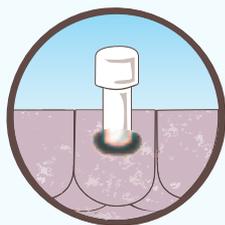
5. Chimney

The clear path down the chimney is probably the most obvious entry point of any house. Santa Claus uses it, so why shouldn't a jolly old raccoon? Check the flue from the bottom and the top (if access is possible) for signs of any critters; also check the smoke shelf, and make sure the damper is shut. If the coast is clear, install a sturdy, fire-code-approved chimney cap over the opening—even if you use your fireplace or woodstove in the winter. The solid, flat top and grated sides will help keep the chimney clear of debris and animals while allowing for proper venting.



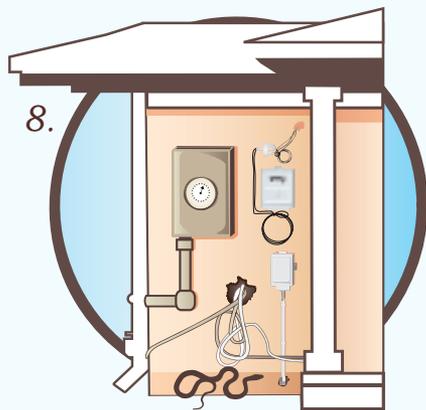
6. Gutters

"Gutter stoppages can cause a problem if they go uncorrected for a long time," says Griffin. Water backups brought on by clogging leaves can create gaps, either by speeding the deterioration of the trim board behind the gutter or by weighing down the gutter and causing it to tear away. Many gutter guards are inviting to squirrels and offer insufficient protection, and they can shield potential problems from view. Unless you've installed an expensive armored system, HWS recommends some old-fashioned elbow grease: "It's better to just clean your gutters," Griffin says. "That way you know if your gutters are functioning properly or if you need to paint or repair the trim board behind it."



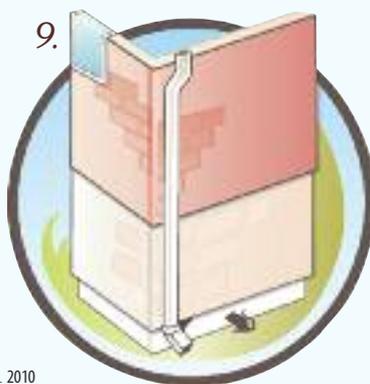
7. Vents

Many vents are insufficiently protected with weak wire mesh that's too easily opened. Exposed to the elements, unpainted wood around soffit vents or gable vents can deteriorate quickly, while ridge cap vents can be blown off or damaged during storms. On a recent HWS job, the plastic rain housing over a powered attic vent had become brittle from sun damage, to the point where "you could touch it and it would fall apart," says Griffin. "A raccoon just came upon it and realized there was a nice warm air flow carrying the smells of the house." Vents should be secured and covered with at least 16- to 18-gauge screening, with openings no larger than 1 inch. Standard dryer, bathroom, and stove vents can be protected with rodent/bird guard covers available at hardware or home supply stores, while custom covers made of wire can be secured over larger vents. (See "Web Extras.") Keep an eye on the mats that seal openings around plumbing vents; they can deteriorate and, if weakened, be pulled up by curious critters.



8. Utility Holes

Chances are these were drilled larger than needed. If the expandable foam or caulking filling the extra space has become brittle or flaked away, replace it. "That can be an attractive entry for rodents because of the size of the entry and where it is on the foundation," Griffin says.



9. Foundation

Check the threshold under all exterior doors, and look for gaps in brick, siding, and places where different building materials intersect. Examine casings around windows and the windows themselves; those at the foundation often break. Holes smaller than a few inches can be caulked, stuffed with copper mesh or steel wool, or filled with expandable foam. Repair larger openings to original condition.

Web Extras

- ▶ Find tips for avoiding inhumane wildlife control companies
 - ▶ Read our instructions for creating custom vent covers
 - ▶ Watch a video about The HSUS's Humane Wildlife Services
- Find all this and more at humansociety.org/magazine.