



# It's a WILD Life

Hot time, summer in the city—perfect weather for a fauna invasion

BY CATHERINE GILDINER

I DON'T understand why people go on safari hunts in deepest darkest Africa when they can just stay at home. There is more wildlife in my downtown Toronto backyard than Hemingway ever dreamed of seeing in Kenya.

About six on a stifling evening last summer I was barbecuing when I had a Hitchcock moment from *The Birds*. An army of raccoons must have heard some kind of bugle call because they suddenly descended from drainpipes, garages, trees and fence tops. They slunk out from under the ferns, crept across the lawn—en masse—and advanced towards the deck, noses in the

air, sniffing my sizzling steaks. An alpha male puffed himself out like Bluto for Olive Oyl and stepped up onto the deck. I yelled at him, but he just hissed and spat. With at least 20 sets of hostile eyes on me, all I could do was slam the barbecue lid and run.

During the night I was awakened from a sound sleep by truly unearthly sounds of battle. In the backyard the next morning, I found a raccoon leg on my patio table, scratches all over my barbecue and big bites out of the attached plastic tray. Out front, a gaggle of neighbours white-knuckling their briefcases had gathered. Many

ILLUSTRATION: PETER FERGUSON

of us on the east side of the street had been part of the onslaught. One man, who didn't speak English, acted out an advancing raccoon. One of my neighbours said he heard on CBC that the previous night had been the hottest in Toronto history. He assumed the behaviour was based on the abnormal temperatures—a Raccoon on a Hot Tin Roof phenomenon. One neighbour had been having a party and had to rush all 30 guests inside. Raccoons pounced on the salmon appetizers before they could carry in the platter.



## Desperate, I started calling animal associations I found on the Web and cried, "9-1-1 skunk!"

About a week later I was having lunch with a friend at a café a few blocks from home. We sat on the patio, sipping iced cappuccino. I looked over to a nearby table that hadn't been cleared yet, and there, in a chair just like any paying customer, sat a raccoon. He held a plate in his hands, brought it to his lips and licked the remains of paprika chicken. Other diners watched in mesmerized horror until the waitress came out banging two pot lids. The raccoon dropped the plate and scuttled up a tree.

I finally had enough when, the next evening, my husband and I went out to read in the garden and found three raccoons in our lounge chairs. So I checked the Web and found a plethora

of idiots. I hope the authors of *Raccoons Are for Loving* and *Raccoon Family Pets* end up with the adorable creatures invading their attics.

Next, I called the city's animal services department. The woman on the line told me raccoons can be territorial. They hate noise, she said, and suggested a radio in my garage. Great.

About two weeks later my husband Michael and I were reading the paper on a Saturday morning in the pergola when he whispered, "Don't look now, but there's a skunk between our chairs,

another at your feet." A third was in the garden. We sat frozen for ten minutes until the gang wandered away. Soon after, my son started bringing his bike through the front door after he counted 11 skunks huddled out back. We were by now completely unable to use our backyard.

Desperate, I started calling animal associations I found on the Web and cried, "9-1-1 skunk!" It was just my luck to be connected to a Saint Francis of Assisi, who said, "We all have to learn to live together and share the earth."

Besides, I found out, there could be a fine of up to \$5,000 for killing or harming wildlife.

I tried a wildlife-removal firm. They told me they're allowed to remove an

animal only if we know it lives inside our property and that they would be set free just one kilometre away. Why? "Government regulations," she said. "They don't do well if they are in an unfamiliar setting."

I was backed into a corner. There was nothing for it but to call the saintly phone operator back. He laid out a plan. "Skunks have poor vision," he said. "At most, they can see three metres in front of them." And, unlike raccoons, they're not aggressive, but if attacked or frightened, they can spray as far as six metres. So if they come nosing along, he said, talk softly to them so they get to know you. "When they get close enough to see you, they won't spray as they've already heard your friendly voice and decided you're not a threat." I'd have to give it a try. (Michael refused, saying he was bad at small talk.)

Two mornings later I was reading the paper when two skunks wandered over. I didn't think they saw me in the chaise longue, so I began a soft, friendly monologue. I tried to avoid contentious topics like personal hygiene and who pays the property tax. I asked one where she was from and

how many children she had. Soon, another joined them. Now I really felt nervous but tried to find things in common.

Having had identical twins, I engaged in a monologue on multiple births and feeding many young. Mrs. Skunk seemed to relate particularly to that and sat down to bake in the emerging dawn. (What I didn't realize was that my neighbour on the other side of the fence, who was letting his dog out, overheard this one-sided conversation. "I hadn't pegged you as a Doctor Dolittle type," he told me later.)

This cohabitation scheme has been used a few times now, and eventually the skunks nose away under a fence. I am running out of new things to say when they approach, but that's no worse than some of the dinner parties I've attended. Actually, it's interesting to live with a species that is not violent but can decimate you with an outrageous odour. Being aggressive does not work: You can't shoot it or you'll be fined, and you can't poison it or you'll kill your friends' cats. It makes me nervous, but I'll have to learn to get along.

They ought to try that in Iraq.

### SO, THERE!

In order to lure customers to their brand-new unisex hair salon, the owners plastered our neighborhood with signs touting a \$2.99 haircut special.

One well-established barbershop came back with its own marketing strategy. Its sign: "We fix \$2.99 haircuts."

PAT MOSSOP



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