

How to Modify Habitat to Discourage Nuisance Wildlife in Your Yard¹

Holly K. Ober and Arlo Kane²

Although viewing wildlife can be enjoyable, there are situations where wildlife can become a nuisance by causing damage to personal property. Unfortunately, many of the actions homeowners take to attract the wildlife they like to see can also attract wildlife that becomes a nuisance. This document describes some simple steps you can take to deter wildlife that have become a nuisance in residential settings by modifying habitat.

It is important to recognize that animals select an area to live because of the presence of the resources in that location. All wildlife needs three resources to survive: food, water, and cover. If a wild animal has become a nuisance and is causing property damage, consider making some simple habitat modifications to encourage the nuisance animals to move elsewhere. Habitat modification is usually easier and less expensive than some of the more extreme measures such as purchasing deterrents or traps. In some situations, wildlife may be present because you have unintentionally created good habitat for them (i.e., provided the resources they prefer). Getting rid of the nuisance wildlife may be as simple as changing the vegetation in your yard so that you no longer provide desirable food or cover.

Modifying habitat to deter nuisance wildlife is a 3-step process. First, determine which species is causing the problem (see [EDIS publication WEC324](#), titled “How To Identify the Wildlife Species Responsible for Damage in Your Yard” for tips). Second, learn the habitat preferences

of the species causing the problem (i.e., what they eat and where they prefer to nest and hide). Third, make habitat modifications, so you are no longer providing the conditions this species prefers.

Removal of Wildlife Food Sources

Wildlife consume a wide variety of foods, including grasses, flowers, seeds, berries, nuts, fruits, insects, and other animals. If your yard contains any of these items (it's highly likely that it does!), this could be the reason wildlife are spending time in your yard. Investigate the region in your yard where you've found evidence of wildlife visitors, and look for the food the animals have been eating. You might consider removing these food sources. For example, ripe fruit that has dropped from fruit trees may be attracting rats or coyotes; you could reduce wildlife visitation to your yard by picking all fruit from the trees before it drops or by removing the entire tree. Similarly, you could reduce damage to flowers repeatedly consumed by deer by replacing these plants with species or varieties known to be less preferred by deer.

Human food, pet food, and bird seed can also attract wildlife to your home and yard. A number of simple precautions can reduce the likelihood of attracting unwelcome wildlife with food.

Garbage should be kept in wildlife-proof cans, and these cans should be secured at night so that animals cannot

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2. Holly K. Ober, assistant professor/Extension specialist in the Department of Wildlife Ecology and Conservation; and Arlo Kane, regional coordinator of the Landowner Assistance Program, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

knock them over. Consider storing cans in a secure building. Also consider taking cans to the curb the morning of pickup rather than the evening before to limit access by nocturnal animals. Do not store food intended for humans or pets on screened porches. Clean barbeque grills after each use. Enclose compost piles in a framed box using hardware cloth, or put compost in a commercial composter to keep animals out.

Feed pets indoors. If outdoor feeding is absolutely necessary, feed pets during daylight hours and remove uneaten food before dusk to avoid attracting nocturnal mammals.

Unused seed intended for your birdfeeder should be kept in heavy-duty, sealed containers indoors. Mount bird feeders so that they are inaccessible to squirrels and bears. Rake up seed dropped beneath feeders. Consider using bird baths to attract birds rather than bird feeders, to reduce the likelihood of also attracting seed-eating mammals that could become pests.

Removing Wildlife Cover

Vegetation that provides cover for wildlife can increase animals' sense of security. Therefore, removing shrubs and mid-story trees may help discourage deer from visiting your yard, and getting rid of the low-growing shrubs and tall grasses that protect many small and mid-sized mammals can encourage these species to disperse. Many rodents such as mice and rats appreciate tall grass, and once rodents have moved into an area where grass is mowed infrequently, unwanted predator animals such as snakes and birds of prey often follow. You can eliminate rodent infestations and discourage predator species from visiting by mowing more frequently. If mowing isn't feasible, try using herbicides to keep weedy areas free of vegetation that small mammals use for food and cover.

Stacks of firewood, brushpiles, heaps of lumber debris, or even rockpiles can provide ideal conditions for wildlife such as snakes and rodents (including mice and rats) who prefer moist, dark, cool conditions. Even larger mammals, such as raccoons and skunks, may create dens in woodpiles. Dismantling these piles, placing firewood piles on pallets or platforms above the ground, stacking the wood tightly, or moving these piles far from human structures will help prevent nuisance wildlife problems.

Watering Your Lawn and Garden

If you've eliminated food and shelter attractants but nuisance animals are still visiting your yard, it may be that

you are inadvertently attracting them by irrigating too frequently or at the wrong time of day. Soil invertebrates will move towards the soil surface of a lawn saturated with water, and moles create new tunnels close to the surface when the lawn is very wet. Worms and other invertebrates in the surface layers of the soil at night will attract armadillos or skunks from nearby, drier areas. Reducing the frequency and intensity of waterings could reduce pressure from moles, and avoiding watering in the evenings could reduce pressure from armadillos and skunks.

Offering Alternative Sources of Food

Providing a supplemental source of food could prevent nuisance wildlife from feeding on plants of high value to you. You could offer corn, nuts, or seeds to distract animals from the plants you want to protect. However, this strategy is risky because it could attract additional animals to the area, which could lead to more feeding pressure on other vegetation in your yard.

Summary

Although often overlooked, habitat modification is the cheapest and most effective long-term solution to nuisance wildlife problems in residential landscapes. Removing the resources wildlife are seeking when they visit your yard can be a much more cost-effective solution than restricting access to those resources with physical barriers, scaring wildlife with hazing tactics, deterring wildlife with repellents, or removing wildlife by trapping or killing nuisance animals.

Additional Sources of Information

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Table 1. Recommended habitat modifications for deterring nuisance wildlife

Wildlife pest	Habitat modifications
Beavers	remove preferred tree species (willow, gum, cypress, oak, pine, magnolia)
Birds	remove trees and shrubs used as roost sites and nest sites
Deer	remove protective cover (shrubs and midstory trees) replace highly palatable plant species with varieties known to be locally resistant to deer
Rabbits	remove brush piles, dense shrubs, and other sources of cover
Rats, mice	mow frequently to limit areas with tall grass and brush remove dropped fruits beneath fruit trees rake dropped seeds beneath bird feeders regularly
Snakes	remove brush piles, boards, tall grass, and other sources of cover
Squirrels	rake dropped seeds beneath bird feeders regularly rake fallen nuts and acorns beneath trees prune all branches on fruit and nut trees below 6 feet and place an 18-inch metal guard around the base of the tree to prohibit climbing or jumping
Many species	harvest garden vegetables when they are nearly ripe rather than allowing them to fully ripen and attract attention from animals like skunks, coyotes, raccoons, or rabbits