LOS ANGELES UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT PEST OF THE MONTH PROGRAM NO. 22

WILD ANIMALS ON DISTRICT PROPERTY

INTRODUCTION

The Los Angeles Unified School District pest management department has been receiving an increasing number of calls regarding nuisance animals, such as raccoons, opossums, and skunks on district property. Properties in the vicinity of rivers, canyons, foothills, mountains, large drainage canals, and similar areas are often more negatively impacted than those in older more established neighborhoods.

OPOSSUMS

Class: Mammalia, Order: Marsupialia, Family: Didelphidae

The opossum, (*Didelphis virginiana*) is a whitish or grayish mammal about the size of a house cat. Opossums are North America's only marsupial (female with a pouch) mammal. Its face is long and pointed and its ears are rounded and hairless. This animal has 50 teeth – more than are found in any other North American mammal. Canine teeth (fangs) are prominent. When threatened, an opossum may bare its teeth, growl, hiss, bite, screech, and exude a smelly, greenish fluid from its anal glands. If these defenses are not successful, opossums may play dead hence the adage "playing possum".
Opossums may take up residence in substructural areas or within attics of structures. Foods preferred by opossums are animal matter, mainly insects or carrion. Opossum will eat vegetable matter such as fruits, berries, nuts, grains, etc. Opossum living near people often visit compost piles, garbage receptacles, or food dishes intended for cats, dogs, birds, and other pets. They may also destroy poultry, game birds, and their nests. Opossums have been reported to be infected with, and may be carriers of, many diseases including leptospirosis, relapsing fever, murine typhus, and Rocky Mountain spotted fever. Opossum are often heavily infested with many species of ectoparasites, including thousands of cat fleas, which will readily bite humans.

SKUNKS

Class: Mammalia, Order: Carnivora, Family: Mustelidae

The striped skunk, *Mephitis mephitis*, is the most common skunk species in California. It is a house-cat sized animal (4 to 10 pounds) that has long black fur with two variable broad white stripes down the back. The head is triangular and the tail is large and bushy. The strong musk odor of skunks is expelled from two scent glands near the anus.
Skunks are nocturnal preferring to hunt at night for insects, small rodents, carrion, poultry, eggs, nestling birds, fruit, pet food, and garbage. Because they are active at night, skunks are often smelled but not seen. They will use any sheltered place as a den including debris and wood piles, animal burrows, culverts, under buildings, under decks, and in outbuildings.
Skunks become a problem when their activities conflict with human interests. All skunks have the ability to discharge a nauseating musk from their anal glands. They are capable of spraying their musk several times with accuracy to about 10 feet. Confrontation with pets often results in the pet being sprayed or bitten. Skunks can also cause severe damage to gardens and lawns by their digging activities. While searching for grubs and other soil animals, skunks frequently uproot turf and other plants. Skunks are predators and can decimate ground-nesting wild bird populations and local populations of endangered species of small mammals.
Skunks are primary carriers of rabies in California. Approximately 65 percent of the skunks checked for rabies tested positive for the disease during the past five years. Rabies is a viral disease that is fatal in mammals, including man and domestic animals (dogs, cats, livestock). It is transmitted by the bite of an infected animal. In addition to rabies, skunks can carry leptospirosis, listeriosis, canine distemper, canine hepatitis, Q-fever, tularemia, and trypanosome. They are also heavily infested with ticks, fleas, and mites, which are known carriers and transmitters of diseases.

RACCOONS

Class: Mammalia, Order: Carnivora, Family: Procyonidae

Raccoons (*Procyon lotor)* are medium sized animals 12 to 35 plus pounds and 20 to 40 inches long, with bushy tails with 4 to 7 black rings around it. The fur has a salt and pepper appearance with the black mask marking on a whitish face characteristic of the species.
The diet of raccoons is extremely diverse. They will eat fruit, berries, grain, eggs, poultry, vegetables, nuts, mollusks, fish, insects, rodents, carrion, pet food, and garbage. Contrary to popular myth, raccoons do not always wash their food before eating, although they frequently play with their food in water.

Raccoons are nocturnal animals and they are seldom seen during the day. Raccoons den up in hollow trees, large drain pipes, in the substructural areas and attics of buildings, in storage structures, brush piles, debris piles, and abandoned burrows.
In urban areas, raccoons damage buildings (particularly attics and roofs), gardens, fruit trees, lawns, garbage receptacles. They are also attracted to pet food left outdoors and they will attack pets. They are serious predators of poultry and wild birds.
Raccoons are known carriers of rabies, canine distemper, encephalitis, histoplasmosis, trypanosomiasis, coccidiosis, toxoplasmosis, tularemia, tuberculosis, listeriosis, leptospirosis, roundworms, and mange. They are also infested with fleas, ticks, lice, and mites which are known transmitters of disease. Children and pets are particularly at risk from diseases harbored by raccoons.

PROBLEM PREVENTION

Opossums, skunks, raccoons, feral cats, and other wild animals are attracted to urban structures by easy accessibility to food, water, and shelter. Reducing or eliminating the availability of all of these factors will reduce the attractancy to these animals and encourage those that might be living there to leave.
Tight fitting lids on dumpsters and other outdoor trash receptacles will deny these animals easy access to food debris especially at night. Professional daily handling, storage, and disposal of trash and garbage will go a long way to discourage these animals from being attracted to district properties.

ALL OF THE ANIMALS DISCUSSED ABOVE HARBOR A HOST OF INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL PARASITES AND DISEASE ORGANISMS THAT CAN ATTACK HUMANS AND CAUSE VARIOUS DISEASES. FOR THIS REASON, IT IS IMPERATIVE THAT PEOPLE ON DISTRICT PROPERTIES DO NOT PUT OUT FOOD OR WATER FOR THESE ANIMALS OR ENGAGE IN ANY OTHER ACTIVITIES THAT ENCOURAGE THE PRESENCE OF THESE CREATURES IN AREAS WHERE THEIR ACTIVITIES IN UNDESIRABLE.

EXCLUSION

Opossums, skunks, and raccoons must be prevented from taking up residence in attics and substructural areas of district properties. This is the easiest and simplest way of keeping these animals out of buildings. Holes, and various other openings in structures, must be located and screened off to prevent animals from entering buildings. Plant managers need to become more cognizant and observant as they go about their daily business so that they can identify potential animal entry points and call the appropriate crafts to get these areas promptly repaired. We often receive calls about animals under buildings and the first question we ask is: How did the animal get under the building?

Animal proofing a structure is the first and best line of defense against animals getting into buildings.
When animals are allowed to access and harbor under structures, ticks, mites, and fleas associated with these animals often become problems and then we are asked to apply pesticides to control these blood-sucking pests. As you are aware, pesticides can be harmful to people and the environment, and the District IPM policy dictates that we avoid using pesticides as much as possible. Thus, **it is important that you help us button-up our buildings so as to prevent animals from entering and living in or under them.**

TRAPPING

Baited cage traps can sometimes be used to trap undesirable wildlife. However, we are having great difficulties getting people at City of Los Angeles, Department of Animal Regulation to accept trapped animals. They are very emphatic in refusing to accept trapped skunks because of the obnoxious odors that are associated with these animals. They will instruct you to release the animal in the general vicinity where it was caught. That is of no help because these animals have very good homing instincts and they will quickly return to where they were trapped. So what do you do with trapped wildlife? California Department of Fish and Game regulations prohibit the relocation of wildlife without **written** permission of the Department. As you can see, it is not easy, and it is becoming increasingly difficult, to trap and remove offending wildlife from District properties.

CONCLUSIONS

Basically, we are left with a few things that can be done to discourage wild animals from living on District properties. **PLEASE DO NOT ENCOURAGE THESE ANIMALS BY PUTTING OUT FOOD AND WATER FOR THEM ON DISTRICT PROPERTIES. If you observe such activities, please report them to site administrators so that appropriate action can be taken.**
Deny these animals access to garbage and other miscellaneous food materials on school grounds. If need be, lock the lids of the dumpsters at night to keep them out.
Repair entry points in structures so as to prevent animals from gaining entry.
We need the help and cooperation of everyone in order for us to mitigate this problem. Together, we can do it. Thanks for your help.

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