Overview of How to Stop Damage Caused by Nuisance Wildlife in Your Yard[1]

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In Florida, we are fortunate to have a wide variety of wildlife to watch and enjoy. Indeed, many homeowners attempt to attract particular types of wildlife to their yards to watch. However, wild animals can become a nuisance in some situations. This document is the first in a five-part series describing tactics you can use to cope with wildlife that have become a nuisance. Here we suggest a sequence of steps you can implement when wildlife are causing damage in your yard. These suggestions should help reduce wildlife damage in a practical, humane, and environmentally responsible manner.

Four-step Process to Managing Nuisance Wildlife in Residential Settings

Step 1: Identify which species is responsible for the problem. Accurately identifying the culprit is an essential first step to finding an appropriate and effective solution to wildlife damage issues. Although it may seem obvious that correct identification of the culprit would be job one, in fact many people skip this first step because they're familiar with one animal pest causing trouble and simply assume the same pest is back again. If you blame the wrong animal, however, you may use the wrong management tactic, in which case the damage will likely continue, your time and effort will be wasted, and your frustration will increase. On the other hand, knowing which species has caused the problem will allow you to develop a counter strategy that matches the habits of the animal causing the problem.

There are several important clues worth investigating when you try to identify which species is causing the problem.

- First, inspect the damaged plants or soil to determine which species created the bite marks, gnawings, peckings, scratchings, diggings, mounds, etc.
- Second, examine signs the animal has left behind. Look for tracks (footprints), scat (feces), burrows, and nests.
- Third, determine the time of day the damage is occurring. The time of the animal's visit, whether it was the middle of the day, at night, or at dawn and dusk, will narrow down the possible number of species potentially responsible. For example, gray squirrels and chipmunks are active during the day, whereas rats, mice, raccoons, skunks, opossums, and armadillos are more likely to cause damage in the evenings or at night.

More specific suggestions on how to identify which wildlife species has caused damage in your residential landscape are provided in the EDIS publication WEC324, "How to Identify the Wildlife Species Responsible for Damage in Your Yard." This publication provides many photos of common yard disturbances caused by wildlife in Florida to assist you in determining which species might be responsible for the problem in your yard.

1. This document is WEC323, one of a series of the Wildlife Ecology and Conservation Department, UF/IFAS Extension. Original publication date October 2012. Reviewed October 2015. Visit the EDIS website at http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu.

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Step 2: Determine why the animal is causing the problem. All wild animals require three resources: food, water, and shelter. Which of these three resources is the animal searching for in your yard? Once you have identified the reason the animal is visiting your yard, you can move on to consideration of how to manage the resource that is attracting the wildlife (i.e., remove it, prevent access to it, or provide an alternative you don't mind animals using instead).

Step 3: Carefully weigh your options to determine which approach is most suitable for solving your nuisance wildlife problem. Consider the following three tactics:

1. habitat modifications (modify the resource the wildlife is after),

2. deterrents (restrict access to the resource the wildlife is after, using chemical repellents, fencing, netting, frightening devices, etc.), or

3. trap or kill the offending individual.

The first option, habitat modification, is typically the cheapest and also the most effective long-term solution to nuisance wildlife problems. The goal of this strategy is to deny wildlife access to one or more of the resources they need to survive by removing the resource entirely. Because wild animals regularly move to find the resources they need, removing a resource will force the animal to move away from your property to find it elsewhere. Animals will have no reason to stay if they can no longer find the resource(s) that attracted them there in the first place. More detailed information on how to modify habitat to deter nuisance wildlife is available in the EDIS publication WEC 325, "How to Modify Habitat to Discourage Nuisance Wildlife in Your Yard."

If habitat modifications are ineffective or impossible, deterrents can be used to thwart access to particular resources. Physical barriers such as fences and netting can prevent wildlife movement, but these can be costly if large areas must be protected. Chemical materials with offensive odors or tastes can be used to encourage animals to find food elsewhere. Most of these materials wash off after rain, break down over time, and must be reapplied to new plant growth, so this option can be labor-intensive and costly. Chemical repellents tend to be most effective in areas with light to moderate feeding pressure, small acreages, and areas where alternative food sources are available. Finally, frightening devices such as horns, bells, whistles, pyrotechnics, propane cannons, recordings of animal alarm calls, strobe lights, and motion-sensitive lights or sprinklers can increase the likelihood that animals will move on to find quieter locations to spend time rather than endure the repeated disturbances. Each of these deterrents may be effective in some situations, but may provide only temporary relief in others. More information on the use of deterrents is available from the EDIS publication, WEC326, "How to Use Deterrents to Stop Damage Caused by Nuisance Wildlife in Residential Settings."

Many restrictions apply to trapping, and poisoning of wildlife is only rarely allowed, so these two options should be considered as last resorts in those situations where habitat modifications or deterrents won't work. In addition, trapping and relocating is likely to provide only short-term relief in outdoor situations, and may simply move the problem to someone else, so is generally less effective than habitat modifications. (Trapping is more appropriate for circumstances where animals have gotten into a building and need to be removed.) In all situations, it is necessary to become familiar with legal restrictions on trapping, relocating, and poisoning wildlife, and also to assess whether you can handle the situation yourself or should obtain professional assistance. More information on trapping is available from the EDIS publication WEC327, "How to Use Traps to Catch Nuisance Wildlife in Your Yard."

Step 4: After implementing one of the tactics described above, monitor the results of your efforts to determine if they were successful. If not, more extreme measures may be needed. For example, if habitat modifications did not work, deterrents may be warranted. If deterrents were ineffective, you may need to resort to trapping. Documenting your initial, unsuccessful efforts with habitat modifications and deterrents may help you secure a permit to proceed with more extreme tactics, if they become necessary (as described below). It is also worth assessing the degree of damage reduction your tactic produced in relation to the cost of the control and the impact on non-target species when deciding whether to continue use of the same strategy or implement something new.

Regulations Regarding Wildlife in the State of Florida

Wildlife species are protected by both federal and state laws. In fact, all freshwater fish and wildlife plus their nests, eggs, and young are protected from destruction and poisoning. However, in situations where animals are causing damage to personal property in Florida, any wild mammal other than white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus viginianus*), black bear

(*Ursus americanus*), or bats can be taken by a homeowner without a permit. Because poisoning is nondiscriminatory (i.e., poison intended to kill one particular species responsible for causing property damage could kill other species), it is never allowable in Florida. It is also never allowable to use steel traps (i.e., leg hold traps) or a gun and light at night without first obtaining a permit from the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. See Table 1 for more details on state laws pertaining to taking wildlife in Florida.

Nearly all native species of birds are protected by federal and/or state laws, and fines for harming birds can be steep. The law prohibits pursuing, hunting, capturing, killing, possessing, selling, purchasing, or transporting any migratory bird or any part, nest, or egg of any migratory bird. This includes eggs, shells, nests, and feathers. In extreme situations where a bird is causing property damage and deterrents or scare tactics have not alleviated the problem, a permit to destroy an offending bird can be obtained. However, such permits are rarely provided. Strict laws also prohibit harm to non-migratory game birds such as wild turkey (*Melagris gallopavo*) and northern bobwhite quail (*Colinus virginianus*). Birds that are considered non-native and, therefore, not protected by law include house sparrows (*Passer domesticus*), European starlings (*Sturnus vulgaris*), rock doves/domestic pigeons (*Columba livia*), Eurasian collared doves (*Streptopelia decaocto*), and monk parakeets (*Myiopsitta monachus*).

Preventing Future Issues with Nuisance Wildlife

If wildlife have damaged your property in the past, several tactics can help you reduce the chances that additional problems will recur in the future. First, carefully select your plant species when landscaping to avoid those plants known to attract the wildlife species you have had trouble with. Second, learn about the biology of the wildlife species that has previously caused problems so you can adjust your habitat management to provide less-than-ideal conditions for that animal. For example, because regularly watering your yard can attract worms and other invertebrates to the surface of the soil, you should avoid watering at night if you have had difficulties with armadillos, skunks, moles or other nocturnal wildlife species that prefer to forage in moist soil for invertebrates.

Wildlife will be most easily deterred if you begin habitat modifications or hazing tactics before they have formed a regular habit of visiting your yard. Therefore, we recommend initiating a strategy at the first sign of problems rather than allowing problems to escalate. Many farm supply stores, nurseries, and hardware stores sell materials useful in deterring wildlife.

Getting Professional Assistance

Your local UF/IFAS Extension agent should be able to provide general advice on managing nuisance wildlife. If you have a nuisance wildlife problem you don't feel comfortable handling yourself, a good option is to contact a nuisance wildlife control specialist. These specialists may have access to baits and lures not available to the general public. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission can assist in finding a local, licensed wildlife control specialist in your area. A current list of nuisance trappers by county can be found at: https://public.myfwc.com/HGM/NWT/NWTSearch.aspx.

Additional Sources of Information

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Table 1. Regulations pertaining to taking wildlife in the state of Florida.

Type of animal	Regulations
Bird (migratory, non-game)	No migratory, non-game bird species can be taken any time of year. A permit can be obtained for permission to trap, handle, or shoot a specific individual bird causing property damage. Blackbirds, cowbirds, grackles, or crows may be taken when committing or about to commit depredations on ornamental or shade trees, agricultural crops, livestock, or wildlife.
Mammal	Any mammal (other than white-tailed deer, black bear, or bats) can be taken on your personal property if it is causing property damage. Any person owning property may take nuisance wildlife on their property or they may authorize another person to take nuisance wildlife on their behalf. Animals can only be taken within close range to the damage. Poison or steel traps or guns with lights at night cannot be used without a permit. A 'gun and light' or 'depredation permit' (for deer) can enable use of a gun and light at night. Nuisance bobcat may be taken, but any live captured bobcat must be released alive and cannot be euthanized.
Reptile or amphibian	Nuisance alligators may be taken only by a state licensed nuisance alligator trapper. Reptiles and amphibians may be taken throughout the year unless protected. Certain restrictions on numbers do exist for some species. The following species are prohibited from take: gopher tortoise, alligator snapping turtle, Barbour's map turtle, Suwannee cooter, striped mud turtle, all sea turtles, American crocodile, Atlantic saltmarsh snake, bluetail mole skink, Florida Keys mole skink, eastern indigo snake, sand skink, Florida brown snake, Peninsula ribbon snake, Key ringneck snake, rim rock crowned snake, short-tailed snake, Florida pine snake, red rat snake, Florida bog frog, pine barrens tree frog, and Georgia blind salamander.