

Wild Things: Raccoons in Chimneys

BY MARGARET BAIRD

With spring comes the start of house-hunting season, and any suburbanite might start a list of her dream home's amenities with the basics: Is it safe and quiet? Snug and dark? Er ... did you say "dark"? Well, yes: The house-hunters we're talking about are of the raccoon variety, and the average uncapped chimney looks like the Taj Mahal to a 'coon. Tall, sturdy, and protected, chimneys are perfect birthing dens—making up for the steady demolition of hollow trees across our neatly subdivided landscapes.

Anxious human homeowners may light up your switchboard with "raccoon in chimney" calls this season. And the irony is that it's one of the easiest wildlife conflicts to prevent—all a homeowner needs to do is cap the chimney, preferably well before raccoon baby season starts up in late March.

Committed do-it-yourselfers will find chimney caps readily available at home and garden stores, while the less handy or sure-footed can hire a pro to do the job. But first things first: Anyone capping a chimney needs to make sure no one's already moved in on the sly! Check for squatters by duct-taping crisscrossed pieces of yarn or a towel over the top of the flue, and inspect it two days later. If the yarn is still in place, it's safe to assume the chimney is vacant.

Two important "don'ts" for callers: Never seal the top of a furnace flue, as dangerous gases can quickly build up inside a house. And never start a fire in a fireplace to "smoke out" animals in the chimney. This usually ends sadly and painfully: A mama raccoon can't carry each baby out fast enough, and baby raccoons can't scale the steep walls. They will almost certainly die from the smoke.

The first and best option for dealing with resident raccoons is often to temporarily admit defeat: Wait a few weeks until the young have grown up and moved out, then proceed with capping (the mother raccoon will move her cubs to a ground den when they are about six weeks old).

But if you really can't wait, gentle harassment can convince mama to move her babies to more peaceful digs. First, make sure the damper is closed in your fireplace. Rap gently on the damper with a metal object (like a large spoon). Then turn up the noise by leaving a radio in the fireplace, turned up as loud as you can tolerate. Raccoons are nocturnal, so harassment works best just before dusk, when the raccoon's normal activity period is about to begin. Try several multi-sensory techniques during the day, and chances are good your raccoons will cry uncle that evening and move to a more welcoming 'hood. AS



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