

June 22, 2007

Living with Nature

The first haying has been baled, the first fledglings have left the nest, the Lady Slippers have faded and Peonies are in bloom. Each year all this magic happens like clockwork. However, nature is not perfect and does not unfold without defects or problems. Some problems are predictable and arrive right on time each year, just as the flowers bloom and birds build nests. For instance, those of us who are accustomed to living with nature know that wild turkeys might hang around for the day and we know that keeping the raccoons out of our rubbish barrels can be a real challenge.

For some people, these situations are not a joking matter. Our rural towns have recently grown with more housing and commercial development. Many animals have learned to adjust and live quite happily in our suburban midst. Coyotes, raccoons, fox and turkeys are just a few of the not so shy animals making frequent appearances in our lives. For the newcomers who admired the trees and fields surrounding their new home, these feral visitors can come as a surprise and even bring a high degree of stress.

A recent caller was leaving a message on the answering machine. I was on the other side of the room when I heard an authentic tone of desperation in her voice as she said, "Hello....I'm new to the Town and... I have young children and...

I am so afraid because..."

I ran across the room and picked up the phone, thinking she was going to describe a rabid animal. As I approached the phone, she continued: "because there are turkeys in my yard! Are they dangerous?"

I picked up the phone, introduced myself and we talked turkey. No, they are not dangerous. If she wants to discourage them, she can make loud noises (but they might not care) and avoid leaving food, such as bird food, outside. She can clean up the droppings in areas where her children play.

I was thinking, "Oh, oh. Wait till she sees a coyote."

Other recent calls and messages have included the following:

"Hi, Cathy! It's me Rosalee! Listen, honey, there's a dead squirrel right next to my mailbox! I don't want to touch it! What should I do?"

"Hello, I am calling to report a dead bird. No, I don't know what kind it is. I am blind, you see (not completely but "legally" blind, I discovered). I just know it is a dark bird and it is in the driveway and I don't want to touch it." I visited the woman who was concerned about West Nile virus, saw the dead catbird, removed it for her and started up her lawnmower for her so that she could continue mowing the lawn. She was grateful and that was a fun visit.

While these situations may fall into the category of seemingly comical, the callers were all truly distraught and needed accurate and realistic information to guide them. There are other times when that guidance has already been distributed and still, with knowledge, people do foolish things; well intentioned, perhaps but foolish nonetheless.

A recent message on our answering machine indicated that the family had captured a raccoon. They were concerned that the raccoon might be rabid because it looked sick and acted odd. A phone call and a series of questions revealed the following:

They threw rocks and pieces of watermelon at the raccoon to shoo it away.

The raccoon swayed when it walked.

They had successfully lured the raccoon into a cage with pieces of watermelon.

The raccoon had hissed at the mother.

I asked if any of the rocks or watermelon hit the raccoon. I was told that, yes, some did strike the animal.

Hmmm...this information revealed a mixed message regarding rabies. A raccoon out at 9:30 P.M. is not unusual.

Maybe being hit by rocks had stunned the animal and caused it to sway.

A rabid animal is probably not interested in food and not so easily lured into a cage.

A caged healthy wild animal is likely to hiss or growl.

However, a caged rabid animal can fling saliva, dangerously potent with rabies, onto the face and into the eyes and/or mouth of anyone within spitting distance.

Rabies can be prevented with prophylactic shots shortly after contact but it cannot be treated if actually contracted. If you get rabies, you die. This is too serious to ignore and/or assume that there has been no contact, not even contact with saliva.

If you see an animal acting strangely, please report it to the police dispatcher. The police are supposed to log the call and contact the animal control officer and the Board of Health office and the chairman of the Board of Health.

In the meantime, while waiting for the police and/or the animal control officer and/or the Board of Health to arrive, please do not attempt to trap the animal. Even though good intentions to keep the sick animal away from the neighborhood's children may motivate you to take action, please leave wild animals alone.

It is with good reason that the State's rabies awareness posters advise, "Pet your own. Leave others alone."

Living with nature is beautiful and amazing and wonderful but not without risk. Be aware of your risks. Please do not risk your life.