

Published June 8th, 2011

Controlling the Wild Things

By Sophie Braccini



Adrian the cat surveys a skunk in the backyard.
Photo Cherie Grant

The cover story of the late May edition of *The Economist* is about the 'Anthropocene,' a new geologic chronological term for our time characterized by the reshaping of the planet by humans. Wilderness is becoming increasingly irrelevant, because the world's ecosystems are increasingly dominated by creatures that fare well in an environment dominated by humans while their wilder, natural predators are disappearing. In the suburban environment, where readily accessible food abounds, we see the proliferation of what some call pests - such as skunks, raccoons or turkeys - while mountain lions and other predators that could control these populations are pushed further away. Humans do not always react positively to this cohabitation with semi-rural wildlife.

Cherrie Grant lives in one of Moraga's peaceful neighborhood that adjoins open space. In a recent letter to her neighbors, the former Moraga mayor explains the steps she took to address the increasing skunk problem on her property. She contacted Contra Costa Vector Control and Inspector Joe Cleope came to her house to survey the problem.

"He (Cleope) has apparently removed about six skunks from our area, and has had several other calls," she said, "Unless we all cooperate, the problem will become increasingly worse." Cleope could not find a skunk den at Grant's house and will have to trap somewhere else. "The problem is that some residents are leaving cat food outside their homes," adds Grant, "and it encourages all sort of animals to get closer to homes."

She hopes that more neighbors will call on Vector Control, which is a free service. As far as skunks are concerned, Vector Control can intervene if the animals are considered a potential rabies vector, but not for odiferous issues. The free public service was established at the beginning of the 20th century to prevent the spreading of diseases such as malaria. Today Vector Control continues its efforts to protect the public from emerging diseases. They are well known for mosquito control programs, and removal of ground-nesting yellow jackets. They also assist cities that have problems with mice and rats. But Vector Control does not offer a solution for raccoons or turkeys.

In Moraga, turkeys continue to fly around and nest in the hills.

Kiwanis President John Haffner, who asked the Moraga Town Council not long ago to do something about the turkey issue, recently obtained a depredation permit for his home from California Department of Fish and Game Warden Nicole Kozicki.

The permit gives Haffner the authorization to kill the birds himself; but he thought it more humane to contact Peter Lacy, a trapper with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Wildlife Services program, who would catch the large birds. "Pete explained that the turkeys visit our neighborhood because of the olive trees they feed on," said Haffner, "and the pine trees they roost in. He can help individual homeowners who get a depredation permit, but not a whole neighborhood, unless a homeowners' association contacts the Department with a permit of its own."

Lacy's philosophy is to manage wildlife, not eradicate it. He believes that many problems can be solved with behavioral change on the part of humans, like removing sources of food.

Haffner could cut down his pines and harvest all his olives, but he believes that it would not solve the problem at the neighborhood level; he sent letters to his neighbors asking for their input. "Some asked me what they could do to help," said Haffner. Lacy indicated that trapping at this time, when there is an ample food supply in the area, would not be very effective and that he could come back in November when hungry birds would be more easily enticed by food left in traps. "I do not see a solution to the problem yet," says Haffner, "And right now all the females are nesting, preparing a new generation of turkeys for next year."

Fortunately for Moraga, urbanized wild life has not reached the level of Cape Town, South Africa, where baboons open windows, refrigerators, and garbage bins in search of food. And anyone who vacations at Lake Tahoe knows that the local bears will help themselves to just about everything - reportedly even wandering into a popular North Shore restaurant last fall as diners hastily made their way out the other door. One might hope nobody teaches Moraga's turkeys and skunks to do that.

Reach the reporter at: sophie@lamorindaweekly.com

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