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Taking Care of Pests Without Pesticides

By Sophie Braccini

James Schmerker with a skunk trap.   *Photo Sophie Braccini*

Jenny Papka knows all too well that the use of rodenticides, the poisons to get rid of gophers, rats, mice, or voles, can end up being a catastrophe for other wildlife. The co-owner of Lamorinda-based Native Bird Connections, who owns 16 non-releasable birds of prey that she partners with to educate residents of all ages, says: "It's lethal, it's hideous." She recently cited figures from UC Davis that showed high levels of poisoning, often lethal, in 70 to 80 percent of the sick birds that come their way.

Papka is a supporter of Parents for a Safer Environment's training campaign designed to show residents ways to get rid of pests of all sizes, inside and outside the home, without using chemicals. At a recent day-long training session in Moraga conducted by PfSE, the public and representatives of local agencies were invited to learn about alternatives to pesticides and rodenticides.

"The Department of Fish and Wildlife are finding out that every animal has traces of rodenticide in their systems, even road-kills," said PFSE founder Susan JunFish at the training session. "[Veterinarians] are finding out that pets are also being affected."

One of the main strategies James Schmerker from Animal Damage Control suggests to deal with the problem, pesticide free, is to use different types of traps for rats, mice, gophers and voles. "For rats we recommend the raticator," said JunFish. The trap gives a deadly electric shock to the rodent. For mice, regular wooden mousetraps should be placed in the direction mice would be traveling, like along a wall or an edge, affixed with putty.

Traps are also the best option for bigger pests: raccoons, skunks and ground squirrels. "If you have skunks under your house, you can use a one way door trap," said Schmerker. "Attach it to the access where the skunk goes in and out or under your house. If they are not in breeding season, you will have no problem catching them.