



Raccoons rule our neighborhoods. Why just the other day the internet ignited over a raccoon in St. Paul that climbed a 23-story building for a bowl of kibble. Then there was that newspaper report from Youngstown, Ohio, of zombie raccoons terrorizing the suburbs. Living in Seattle as I do, these stories don't surprise me at all. The population density of raccoons in cities like mine ranges from 130-390 raccoons per square mile. You can do the math. I did—that's a lot of raccoons. By my reckoning, if you lined up all the raccoons living in the greater Seattle metro area and had them hold hands on the Interstate-90, they would stretch from here to Missoula.

When people and wildlife cross paths in the city things usually go afoul. That's a given. For example, one summer weekend a few years back I installed a new pond in our front yard. I dug the hole, filled it with water, and stocked it with fish and water lilies. I spent a lot of money on that pond, anticipating a beautiful embellishment in my private paradise to attract birds and the like. Certainly, such a feature would burnish my standing as an urban ecologist in the neighborhood—I had already achieved some status by reporting the neighbors' illegal spraying and tree cutting to the municipal authorities.

A few days after the pond was inaugurated, the wife called me at work. "Hi honey, there are two raccoons floating on their backs in the pond eating your fish and plants. Oh... they look so cute... just like otters."

I raced home, but was too late. Mayhem had struck. The fish were gone. I had even named one of them. Spotty was a mottled, plump, lethargic goldfish.

After I introduced him to his new home, Spotty rose to the surface and ogled me with his pop-eyes. He oozed gratitude as I fed him fish flakes. Then the raccoons came. Sometimes I imagine Spotty squirming in the air whilst one of the crazed creatures holds him by the tail over a gaping mouth like a 1920s frat boy. Lord rest poor Spotty's soul. Why—those varmints even pulled up my lilies and devoured them for their succulent bulbs, at \$29.99 per tuber. A few red petals floated on the surface as an epitaph. Then the rascals bit holes in the pond liner so that half of the water leaked out.

Viewing the devastation, my nostrils flared with indignation. "This is war!" I declared through clenched teeth. The missiles had lifted off. From here there'd be no turning back.

My first action was to install a motion-sensing floodlight over the pond. That night I waited in anticipation for the raccoons to arrive. A fine mist hung over the water. At 2 AM the floodlight switches on, illuminating the presence of three raccoons. Garbed in my underwear and itching for action, I rush outside and peer at them from the front porch overlooking the yard. Two of the buggers had waded into the water and splash around while another stands guard on the surrounding rockery. I yell at him from the porch, "Hey you!" He stands on his hind legs and with the lights reflecting in his red eyes, waves his little front feet at me like he is shadow boxing. *What nerve. Who does he think he is, Rocky Balboa?* Then he hisses.

This really gets my goat. I grab the nearest ballistic I can find—some steel garden shears that were left out on the porch, and launch them in his direction. The raccoon stares at the spinning shears like a deer blinded in the headlights. I have to admit, I am an expert dart player even without the balancing effect of a pint of beer in my spare hand. The result of my pitch should have been predictable.

"Bonk!" The shears hit him flat in the forehead, bounce off, and splash into the pond. He tumbles backwards into the bushes. I raise my hands to my face and scream, "Nooo—I didn't want to kill him!" As a casual vegan, I am distraught—my shoulders slump and I sob once or twice.

My grief didn't last long. After a few moments the bushes rustle. Rocky Balboa stands up and sways in his boots as his comrades climb out of the water to console him. He turns around to look back at me from his corner. Our eyes lock and he bares his teeth. Instinctively, I bare mine. It's as if I can read his thoughts—*is that all ya got, twerp?* Then they all turn tail and scramble up and over the yard's picket fence. I watch them disappear into the darkness and reappear again in the haze of a yonder streetlight. Like late night carousers turned out of the pub, they rumble down the street as if they haven't a care in the world. Finally, they vanish in the fog.

I decided that I need a better battle plan. I google something like “deter raccoons in the garden.” In my darkened den, hundreds of entries light up the computer screen and scroll before my eyes offering prospective solutions, but two promising tactics stand out.

The first idea was to sprinkle cayenne pepper around the pond and on any plants the raccoons might touch and sniff, thereby delivering a snoot full of pepper point blank. Or at least get the irritant on their hands and then into their mouths, what with their obsessive hand cleaning. That’s what they do. Raccoons are incessant finger lickers. I think, why not go for heavy weaponry? So I spread habañero pepper instead. There’s hotter stuff out there, but I don’t want to be cruel. After all, Bhut Jolokia sounds like the name of a southeast Asian despot.

Of course, the wise strategist realizes that in any action some collateral damage follows close behind. In this case it was both my big-nosed dog Mo and the wife’s flowerbeds. Out for his morning sniff, Mo gets a full shot of pepper in his mucous membranes. He proceeds to bury his nose in the flowerbed like a ploughshare. Mo trenches deeply through a bed of petunias and hoes about half way through a row of carrots before he surfaces for air. He sneezes twice and shakes his head so vigorously that his ears flip-flop and the collection of old license tags on his collar jingle. Curiously, he seems to be smiling and quite content with his endeavor.

Not so the wife. She pronounces, “Well, that was clever. Now you owe me some garden time.” I hate gardening.

This was a setback. I reach back into my internet arsenal and read about “fox urine” as a potential deterrent. It seems very organic. Hmm...I say to myself as I stroke my beard. I ponder how I might milk pee from one of the raccoons’ most formidable enemies. Difficult. But I’d read Farley Mowat’s *Never Cry Wolf*, and remember the part where Mowat marks the territory around his tent with his own urine to ward off intruding wolves. This strategy worked for Mowat—the wolves avoid his yellow perimeter like the plague. What can go wrong?

In preparation, I drink a liter of cola about an hour before sunset, and then I wait. As darkness falls, I am more than ready to deliver my load. This will be their Waterloo. *Wait, is that an ABBA song? Well, Gettysburg then.*

When the urge hits me, I stand by the pond with spigot in hand just as the floodlamps light up the night. Obviously there were some glitches in my tactic. The first was the motion-sensing floodlight. I forgot about that. Besides, the light’s on-switch had a several-second delay.

So here I am by the pond, exposed midstream in full view of Dorothy, our elderly neighbor whose kitchen window overlooks my yard. She is washing the dinner dishes in the sink when the beacon flares upon me.

She must have observed me with my head back, smiling broadly at the stars in joyous relief as I let loose. Not long afterwards she put her house on the market. For several months I notice that the other neighbors seem to avoid me.

The second problem was that raccoons are not wolves. Instead of shirking my territory, the lunatic creatures stake out their own claim to the pond. I unplug the betraying lamp and redouble my efforts. 7-Up probably wonders—what-the-heck?—about the spike in their regional sales. Mo thinks it will be good fun to join in. *That mutt-faced knuckle head.*

Finally, the wife intervenes. “What on earth is that stink by the pond?” she says. I also had noticed the lemony stench with funky earth undertones. After I suggest what the reason could, maybe, possibly be—she threatens to snip the problem off at the bud with the aforementioned garden shears, promptly putting an end to the escalating deluge.

The hostilities with the raccoons dragged on for a couple more years. They were unrelenting. More battles were fought. I won’t bore you with the details. Some of them that involved traps and explosives were, no doubt, illegal. I’ll let you know how it ended though. In the *Art of War*, Sun Tzu said, “All warfare is based on deception. Let your plans be as dark and impenetrable as the night.”

With these words of wisdom to guide me, I executed the final plan. I submerged little mousetraps weighted down with stones in the darkness at the bottom of the pond. They snap on my enemies’ feet—their “Achilles heel” so to say. As a naturalist and animal lover (except for the neighborhood pigeons that Dorothy had lured in with her suet. They coo with enraging pleasantries—but that is another story), I modified the weapons so they won’t snap hard on their sensitive pinkies, but with just enough force for the raccoons to suspect that piranhas are lurking in the shadows. Modesty prevents me from bragging about the brilliance of this idea.

Sometimes late at night when I’d hear a yowl rise from the garden, I peeked out from behind the window’s curtain to see a miffed raccoon hobbling off clompity-clomp with a mousetrap attached to his foot, until finally the unwanted shoe slipped off somewhere down the road.

Time passed and finally I tired of replacing the traps and removing dead fish from them. Besides, it was getting expensive. Eventually I gave my pond over to the raccoons.

Now I sit on the front porch overlooking the pond and rub Mo’s grey belly with my bare foot. I love to watch his rear feet air-scratch imaginary fleas. With maturity I have come to realize that we are delusional to think we are the masters of our domain. You can place a feature in your garden to attract critters, but you can’t

choose the critters you are going to attract. Often the damage that you inflict in fighting them is worse than that of the scourge itself. So Youngstown citizens, my suggestion is that you relax and understand that it is you who are living in nature's world. Late at night after we are safely tucked into our comfy eiderdowns, outside it is zombie raccoons who rule the colorless night.

But if you do want to stew on something—lately I've seen stories in the news about writhing snakes in toilet bowls. Big ones. Now that's something to fret about.