



WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT & COEXISTENCE PLAN

Prepared by Chicago Animal Care and Control



Table of Contents

Background	2
State and Local Governing Law, CACC Policies and Procedures	3
About Chicago’s Urban Wildlife	3
Raccoons	3
Opossums	4
Attractants in Urban Areas	6
Coexistence: Suggestions for Residents.....	6
Prevention	6
CACC’s Assessment and Management Methods	7
Reporting and Monitoring	7
Maintaining Public Parks and Recreation Spaces.....	8
Public Outreach.....	8
Further Considerations.....	9
Cross-Department Coordination.....	9
Habitat Modification.....	10
Resources	10
Appendix	11

Background

As urban networks continue to grow and thrive globally, there is an increasing focus on the city as a site for conservation. Although many forms of wildlife become alienated and displaced by largescale urban development, in recent years species have started adapting to cities across North America. Chicago is a clear example of this, with a vibrant range of wild urban animals. This offers residents the opportunity to engage with many types of wildlife on a daily basis – from raccoons and squirrels to larger animals such as coyotes. Situated near both a lake and river, the city has a unique position as a hub for many migratory birds. Although wildlife serve as a key part of urban environments, their presence comes with the possibility for unexpected and potentially negative interactions with urban residents. This plan focuses on raccoons and opossums in particular, as both species are especially challenging for residents of the city. Below is an overview of each animal, the potential challenges associated, suggestions for local residents to implement in order to maintain coexistence, and the city’s management responses.



Understanding the behavior patterns and characteristics of local wildlife is an instrumental component in navigating positive relationships with the natural world around us. That being said, it is the goal of this plan to inform both municipal actors and the

general public in order to implement strategies that maintain positive boundaries with local animal species.

State and Local Governing Law, CACC Policies and Procedures

The Illinois Wildlife Code (520 ILCS 5/) uses the category “fur-bearing mammals” for the following: mink, muskrat, raccoon, striped skunk, weasel, bobcat, opossum, beaver, river otter, badger, red fox, gray fox, and coyote. In Illinois, raccoons and opossums are protected as Furbearers. In urban or suburban areas, the Illinois Department of Natural Resources recommends hiring a Nuisance Wildlife Control Operator to remove problem furbearers or seeking a permit from an Illinois Department of Natural Resources District Wildlife Biologist. However, this method is emphasized as a last resort and only applicable in cases where the animal is a threat to human safety or is causing clear damage to property.

About Chicago’s Urban Wildlife

Raccoons

Raccoons (*Procyon Lotor*) belong to the *Procyonidea* family. They are a part of the order Carnivora along with cats, dogs, and badgers. Raccoons are medium sized mammals with gray fur, black facial markings, and a black-ringed tail. Raccoons can weigh anywhere from 6 to 27 pounds and an average adult male is usually between 15 and 20 pounds.

Raccoons are generalist species, meaning they can be found wherever there is access to food, water, and shelter. Additionally, the animal is an

omnivore and will eat both plants as well as animal meat. Their diets can range from berries and nuts to small animals and birds. In urban environments, they will feed on garbage and pet food. Their adaptability allows them to persist, and even thrive, in urban and suburban regions. Access to human food sources allows for high rates of survival and success in a given urban area. Raccoons may be more prevalent in areas with trees, as they provide shelter for the species. Raccoons are most active at night, seeking shelter and den sites in or around homes or human-built environments such as chimneys, attics, or under decks and porches. They breed during February and March and often give birth to young during Spring (April and May). Raccoons often raise litters of three or four young at a time. At this point, raccoons will be more actively searching for cover and likely to utilize the shelter of buildings and structures.

Raccoons can climb and swim, often using their climbing skills to avoid threats. On average, raccoons may live anywhere between three to five years. Animals such as coyotes and foxes may prey on young raccoons, however, automobiles serve as the largest threat to fully grown raccoons. The home ranges for urban raccoons are often smaller than those of rural raccoons due to concentrations of resources. They can be found in every county in Illinois, with numbers increasing since the mid 20th century.

Virginia Opossums

The Virginia opossum (*Didelphis Virginiana*) belongs to the *Didelphidae* family and is the only marsupial in North America. An average opossum weighs between 6 and 15 pounds and has a slender snout accompanied by

a long tail. They have white fur with a mix of gray and black hair. A typical opossum habitat is a wooded area near a water source, however, they have adapted to fringe habitats in urbanized regions. Similarly to raccoons, opossums find shelter and den under structures, in sheds and piles of brush, or inside trees.

In urban areas, opossums have smaller ranges averaging around 12 acres. They are found throughout Illinois, but in higher abundance in the Southern part of the state. Breeding takes place in January and February, with a gestation period of around 13 days. Litter sizes can be up to eight and, at the time of birth, baby opossums crawl into their mother's pouch and continue to grow. Opossums will spend about two or three months in their mother's pouch before leaving. At this point, they may continue to nurse and catch rides on the backs of their mothers.

Opossums have omnivorous diets, often scavenging for food. They will eat fruit, vegetation, insects, small amphibians, and often feed on the carcasses of dead animals. The presence of opossums may serve as useful in combating Lyme disease, as they are known to feast on ticks. On average, opossums may consume as many as 5,000 ticks in a given season and provide an ecosystem service benefitting human health. Furthermore, they consume pests such as mice, cockroaches, and rats and offer a helping hand to gardeners by feeding on snails and slugs. Like raccoons, opossums are nocturnal. They do not tend to seek out interactions with people, but will respond with a hiss or growl if provoked. In some especially threatening cases, opossums will pretend to be dead as a defensive reaction. Their average lifespan is about two years. Predators

include: coyotes, foxes, raccoons, dogs and mountain lions. However, in urban areas, the biggest threat to opossums is vehicle collision. This is amplified by the fact that they often seek out roadkill as a food source.

Attractants in Urban Areas

Access to food is most often the cause of raccoon or opossum infestations and issues. Raccoons and opossums will situate in an area if there is access to trash, pet food, animal feeders etc. Another factor attracting wildlife to private property (such as attics or porches), is the potential for den sites. If these areas are not sealed, animals may choose them as sites to shield their young from potential outside dangers.

Coexistence: Suggestions for Residents

Prevention

As removal is a last resort (see above section *State and Local Governing Law*), prevention is a key strategy in driving coexistence between humans and opossums and raccoons. Individuals must keep in mind that there are a number of ways to reduce the likelihood of negative interactions between humans and wildlife in Chicago. The presence of food sources is often the leading cause of issues in communities, attracting animals to houses and back yards. That being said, individuals may consider implementing strategies to decrease the amount of potential food accessible to raccoons/opossums. Securing garbage bins properly or using a device/cord to attach bins to a structure will make accessing garbage more difficult for wildlife. Leaving pet food outside is highly discouraged. The removal of

potential den sites is another suggestion for homeowners. This may be achieved by clearing piles of wood and trimming shrubs. It may be useful to prevent the entry of raccoons into areas like sheds, decks and porches by using mesh screens. If doing so, ensure that the bottom edge is buried a minimum of six inches into the ground. Additionally, sound and light machines may instill fear in the animal and deter them from entering an area. Keep in mind that opossums often only stay in one area for two or three days, therefore, drastic measures are often unnecessary. The trapping of wildlife requires a permit issued by the Illinois Department of Natural Resources and it is illegal to relocate raccoons and opossums off your own property.

CACC's Assessment and Management Methods

The CACC recommends that individual residents implement the above suggestions to prevent wildlife related issues. However, in communities experiencing more severe raccoon/opossum related problems, collective efforts may be necessary. CACC receives complaints through the City's 311 system, but due to Illinois wildlife protection laws can only provide services when raccoons or opossums are inside living quarters. For attics and garages, residents will need to contact outside pest control agencies.

Reporting and Monitoring

Raccoons and opossums can be detected in a number of ways. They may be seen during the night or evidence of feeding, droppings, and tracks may indicate their presence in a given area. Furthermore, scratching and other

noises coming from roofs and attics are also signs of infestation. Simply spotting the animals is not necessarily alarming, however, if in a home there is cause for concern. CACC tracks and documents complaint calls and will become aware when wildlife are problematic in a community. Below, an outline of municipal management strategies is described as well as an account of potential future steps to establish human-wildlife coexistence in Chicago.

Maintaining Public Parks and Recreation Spaces

Parks and recreational spaces may serve as denning sites and sources of refuge for local wildlife. Maintaining these areas is, thus, beneficial as it means there are existing wildlife habitats outside the private property of individuals. Animals, however, must be encouraged to situate in the parts of greenspace and public areas not utilized as much by people. In the spaces where the presence of wildlife is undesirable, it is necessary to ensure that woodpiles and potential den sites are cleared and that spaces alongside trails are regularly mowed.

Public Outreach

A key element of successful wildlife management is a focus on education and public awareness. Residents must become aware of their role in shaping the behavior of urban wildlife. In areas experiencing high rates of raccoon/opossum complaints, the city may choose to implement public outreach initiatives in coordination with local Alderman. This may take the form of providing local community centers with tip-sheets and handouts as well as holding community educational programs open to all members of

the public. Seeing as though access to food drives the majority of raccoon and opossum related problems, posting signage in public parks dissuading people from intentional or nonintentional feeding will help residents understand their role in preventing wildlife issues and encourage individuals to properly dispose of food and trash. In the appendix below, there is an example of a tip-sheet with information about raccoon behavior that may be used as educational material for public outreach. In extreme cases, the city may consider implementing a ban on the feeding of wildlife.

Further Considerations

Cross-Department/Agency Coordination

Collective department and agency organization is key to securing and sustaining cohesive, effective, and far-reaching wildlife management efforts. The city of Chicago often works in conjunction with multi-agency coordination to provide more effective and far-reaching urban wildlife management. CACC regularly coordinates with the Department of Buildings, Chicago Park District and the Department of Streets and Sanitation to develop cohesive strategies in addressing matters of wild animals. CACC will also work toward developing strategies with the Chicago Park District , as wildlife occupy spaces in parks and recreational areas. For instance, ‘anti-feeding’ campaigns have been useful in deterring unwanted behavior in wildlife. CACC will also work with the aldermen in all 50 wards to help educate and provide resources to the area residents on wildlife.

Habitat Modification

The city of Chicago is fortunate enough to have expansive greenspace. Recreation space is central to the identity of the city and was a foundational component of Burnham's original plan for Chicago. While serving as an amenity for urban residents, these areas also play key roles in shaping the lives of urban wildlife. Urban parks, greenways, trails, and golf courses are refuges and reservoirs for animals like raccoons and opossums by serving as den sites and routes for travel and movement. Natural environments outside cities are shrinking at the consequence of development and there are fewer and fewer habitat corridors encouraging safe movement of animal species. Improving connectivity between natural habitats is crucial in influencing movement of wildlife away from highly residential and densely populated urban areas. Roadways intersect natural environments and fragment habitats. The construction of under-passages and over-passages will allow species to move safely and lessen the potential for automobile collisions. Fencing along major roadways will also encourage wild animals to stay out of the road. These structural changes, if implemented, will alleviate the negative effects of habitat fragmentation on wildlife.

Resources

- University of Illinois "Living with Wildlife in Illinois" Page <https://extension.illinois.edu/wildlife/about.cfm>
- UW-Extension "Raccoon Ecology & Damage Management" <http://wildlifedamage.uwex.edu/pdf/Raccoon.pdf>
- University of California Agriculture and Natural Resources "Pests in Gardens and Landscapes"
- <http://ipm.ucanr.edu/PMG/PESTNOTES/pn74123.html>

Raccoon Tip Sheet

Raccoons in urban regions are most active at night, seeking food and den sites in or around homes or human-built environments. They breed during February and March and often give birth to young during Spring (April and May). At this time, raccoons will be more actively searching for cover and likely to utilize the shelter of buildings and structures.

Prevention

- Place outdoor food and waste in metal or dense plastic containers with secured lids
- Remove surfaces and materials raccoons may den under as well as trees connected to rooftops and consider covering chimneys
- Cover spaces beneath structures (porches, decks, etc.)
- Use mesh-wire to cover existing fencing

Managing Existing Issues

- Sound machines may instill fear in the animal and deter them from entering an area
- Motion detector devices that use flashing lights will likely scare raccoons from entering yards and porches, serving as another option for individual property owners

