

# The New York Times

## Raccoons Invade Brooklyn

*By Annie Correal, 01 January 2016, New York Times, New York*

A truck pulled up at a small house with a brick porch and a garden on a recent afternoon, and a man wearing a hooded sweatshirt climbed out. A woman led him to the backyard. When they emerged a few minutes later, he was carrying a wire-mesh cage.

The woman handed the man a check, and he put the cage into his truck. As he drove away, he murmured comforting words in the direction of his cargo. On this day it was a male raccoon, lured into a trap with a handful of cat kibble.

Where, exactly, was the man taking the animal? "I'm not going to reveal that," he said. "No one is going to reveal that."



The episode did not happen in the countryside or the suburbs, but in the middle of Brooklyn, in South Park Slope.

The woman, Wendy Hooker, a retired designer of window displays, had first called the trapper in August after seeing a dozen raccoons "wilding" in her yard, as she put it. This one, caught in December, was among the last of the bunch.

"They were trashing my grapevine, beating my cat," Ms. Hooker said. "It was like a frat party. They were insane."

Though New York may be better known for its rat population, the city abounds in raccoons. Their precise numbers are not known, but their encounters with people have increased: The city's 311 help line received 1,581 inquiries about raccoon control in 2015 as of mid-December, up from 936 in all of 2014, according to official data.

And trappers like the one hired by Ms. Hooker say they are getting more and more requests to remove the animals, in all five boroughs, but particularly in Brooklyn.

Here is the tricky part: City law dictates that any captured raccoon must be killed in a humane fashion, because raccoons are known to carry rabies. But many trappers, as well as

homeowners who do the job themselves, say they transport raccoons to parks or wilderness areas and set them free instead; because they don't have the heart to do what is legally required.

Indeed, many of the trappers who were interviewed expressed misgivings about exterminating healthy raccoons — displaying an empathy they did not feel for, say, roaches or bedbugs.

“It used to be a little different,” said the man who took the raccoon from Ms. Hooker's yard, and who asked to be identified only as Don because he releases raccoons rather than killing them. “I am in this for three generations. I go back to the time of the drowning barrel. Guys who trapped animals used to have a 55-gallon drum, and you'd just upend the cage and dump it into the barrel.”

“Now,” he continued, “everybody is just releasing them. They're letting them go in any quiet place.”

The problem, experts say, is that from there, the animals tend to wander into the nearest neighborhood. People see wooded areas as the animals' natural habitat, where they belong. But these are city raccoons that tend to make a U-turn for civilization when dropped off in nature, said Stanley D. Gehrt, a wildlife ecologist at Ohio State University who has studied urban raccoons for two decades. “When you take them and drop them off in a natural environment, they're going to look for buildings,” he said. “It's what they're used to.”

And so, it appears, the spread of raccoons is being aided by the very people employed to combat it.

A special license from the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation is required to remove “nuisance wildlife” such as raccoons. Officials at the department, which has licensed around 100 trappers in the city, said local health departments have jurisdiction over raccoons and other rabies-carrying species. A spokesman for the city's health department said trappers were not permitted to release raccoons caught on a homeowner's property elsewhere, “and if they are doing it, they're doing it illegally.”

Sean Casey, who runs an animal-rescue organization in Brooklyn, said he received calls about raccoons “almost daily.” He said he turned away the callers seeking removal because of the city's laws on raccoons and his group's no-kill policy, and responded only in emergencies, like a recent episode involving a hefty raccoon stuck in a roof gutter. But Mr. Casey said he could understand the tendency on the part of some trappers to relocate the animals.

“You’re trying to find some balance between laws and emotion,” he said. “No one wants to put an animal to sleep, especially not a healthy animal that is just in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

Some trappers say they abide by the law. Chaim Silver, a trapper from Brooklyn, said he had killed raccoons using a carbon-dioxide chamber “because all rabies-vector species have to be euthanized.” He acknowledged that many of his peers released raccoons, but said the real problem was the absence of any management of the issue. “There’s no real control,” he said. “Only trappers. And if trappers don’t kill them, they’ll just reproduce.”



Raccoons are often thought of as forest-dwelling creatures, but they can reach a very high density in cities, said Samuel I. Zeveloff, a professor of zoology at Weber State University in Utah and the author of “Raccoons, A Natural History.”

“They’re truly incredible in their adaptability,” Professor Zeveloff said. Raccoons are omnivorous and opportunistic, easily switching from eating grubs or bird eggs to devouring human and pet food, and from living in tree hollows to inhabiting attics and chimneys. This flexibility, combined with a relative lack of predators, can lead to rapid population growth.

Chris Nagy, a wildlife biologist and a founder of the Gotham Coyote Project, which has set up night-vision cameras around the city to study coyotes and other urban wildlife, said of raccoons that “they’re basically everywhere; they’re in every park we’ve looked at.”

New Yorkers love the animals’ antics. In Central Park last year, a “pizza raccoon” was seen tucking into a slice in the branches of a tree. In Brooklyn, an apparently drunk raccoon staggered through a beer distributor’s warehouse. Images of others have appeared on social media, climbing building facades, fire escapes and even tightrope walking along electrical cables.

But what experts call raccoons’ “synanthropic trend” — their capacity to thrive among humans — can also feel invasive. Female raccoons looking for a den to deliver their kits, as the offspring are called, can squeeze through vents and chimneys, tear through screens and lift up shingles with their dexterous forepaws.

For a few years, William and Malya Levin could hear the loud movements of a raccoon above their Park Slope apartment. “It sounded like a large dog,” Mr. Levin said. Then they endured the

stench of what they believed was a kit that had fallen into a cavity in a wall and died. Later, the Levins knocked a hole in their kitchen wall to extract another kit. (They called the exterminator Nice Jewish Boys Who Kill Bugs, which removed the raccoon and said it had been taken to a rehabilitator outside the city.)

Raccoons have mauled a chicken being raised in a Crown Heights backyard and frequently fight with feral cats. When threatened, they growl, hiss and screech.

In Sunset Park, when residents of a walk-up discovered a raccoon family living in an unused chimney, the mother fled down a fire escape, screeching, and then two of her kits hurled themselves off the roof. The kits survived, but “it was a traumatic night,” one resident, Michael Fleshman, said.

Raccoons can also cause problems with what they leave behind.

In Carroll Gardens last year, at least two raccoon families moved onto one block. Antonia Martinelli, who chronicled the invasion on her blog *The Momtropolis*, noted the animals’ unnerving habit of staring in people’s windows from fire escapes. But it was “the sheer amount of waste, mounds and mounds of it,” that Ms. Martinelli said drove her neighbors to contact Assemblywoman Jo Anne Simon. Raccoon feces can carry roundworm.

Ms. Simon, Democrat of Boerum Hill, said that when she had asked for reports about raccoons, she heard from dozens of families across a broad swath of Brooklyn. “It’s not one block at all,” she said. “We went to a ton of block parties. Nobody cared about the flu shots. I couldn’t push that piece of paper if my life depended on it. Raccoons were the hot topic.”

When raccoons appear, residents often call 311. Many are surprised to hear that it is the property owner’s problem to address: Unless a raccoon appears diseased or dangerous, the city will not remove it.

In recent years, the number of rabid raccoons in the city has been small. In 2015, there were just four cases, all on Staten Island. Around five years ago, though, rabies tore through Central Park’s raccoons, infecting dozens.

A city brochure about raccoons cautions homeowners against capturing the animals and advises contacting a licensed trapper. Still, most trappers who were interviewed said they were unaware that the city prohibited relocation and openly admitted to doing it.

“Correct,” said an employee of the Brooklyn firm Bugs Are Gone Exterminating and Wildlife Control, who did not give a name. “We relocate.”

“If they’re acting funny, we euthanize them,” said Abraham Meirovitz of Pest off Exterminating, also in Brooklyn. Otherwise, he said, they are taken to “like, a state park.”

For \$100 to \$300 per trap, trappers will check traps daily and make unlimited raccoon runs. Most said they released raccoons at least five miles from where they were caught, but in keeping with state law, not across county lines — meaning that most raccoons caught in Brooklyn stay in Brooklyn.

Trappers have been dropping raccoons all over Brooklyn for years, at Floyd Bennett Field and Prospect Park, on golf courses and sports fields, even in tiny parks in the densest neighborhoods.

The animals are also let go in less woodsy settings, from vacant properties to desolate spots like a car lot next to the Metropolitan Detention Center in Sunset Park. The Gowanus area was once neglected, industrial and dimly lit — perfect for unloading a few raccoons, trappers said — but has become too lively.

Raccoon drops mainly happen under cover of night or where there is little traffic. Yet many trappers are not always stealthy. Walid Smith, of A-List Exterminator, recently caught five raccoons nesting in a roof in East New York. He said he drove them to a favorite spot in the light of day.

“Prospect Park is perfect,” Mr. Smith said.

Asked about raccoons’ being released in city parks, Sarah Grimké Aucoin, the Parks Department chief of education and wildlife, said, “We’re not aware of it happening at a large scale.” She added: “If it was happening in a large way, we would notice an increase in the raccoon population” — and in disease rates.

A Brooklyn trapper who would be identified only by the name Bob said he used to leave raccoons at a rehabilitation center on Staten Island. “I loved them,” he said. “The raccoons would crawl up your arm.” But the center closed years ago. The only places left to take the animals, he said, were parks. “To me it’s 100 percent moral,” he said. “But it’s not 100 percent legal.”

Stephanie Bell, a cruelty casework director with the Cruelty Investigations Department of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, said that both killing the animals and relocating them were inhumane. “Trapping in and of itself is traumatic,” she said.

“It is far better to implement humane deterrents,” she added, listing trash-can bungee cords, pepper-based repellents, plastic garden fencing, and “predator effigies, like fake coyotes.”

The Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge lies on the city's southeast edge. Along with Floyd Bennett Field and the Marine Park Golf Course across the bay, it serves as perhaps the biggest raccoon dumping ground in the city.

"We don't kill them," said an exterminator from Queens who said he could not provide his name without his employer's authorization. "We take it to the refuge."

There is evidence of the consequences in Broad Channel, a Queens neighborhood of wooden homes on stilts, near the refuge. "The neighborhood has been invaded like crazy," said Peter Perugini, a trapper with Above All Pest Management in Nassau County.

Mr. Perugini said he had removed raccoons from four Broad Channel homes last year and euthanized them. He described "lots of property damage." One family, he said, had been forced to rip off their roof and pull out the insulation because it was caked in feces.

In the refuge, shore-nesting birds and diamondback terrapin turtles have suffered as a result of the raccoons' arrival, said Russell L. Burke, a Hofstra University biology professor and terrapin expert.

Just three decades ago, there were no raccoons in the area, he said. He added that now, "the terrapin population is crashing." Raccoons ate 95 percent of the terrapin eggs at the refuge in 2015, he said.

"There's no enforcement," Professor Burke said. "We have seen trappers release them at the refuge. They're commonly misinformed, and they don't want to kill them either. But it's a really bad idea."

In 2015, Brad Lander, a City Council member from Brooklyn, introduced a bill that would create a wildlife management advisory board to "recommend policies to preserve and promote biological diversity and the humane treatment of wildlife."

The bill was prompted not by the raccoon problem but by a goose-culling incident in Prospect Park in 2010, a spokesman for Mr. Lander, Democrat of Park Slope, said in an email. But the spokesman said that it would "theoretically address a range of wildlife, including raccoons."

Previous efforts by elected officials to address raccoon management have foundered. Professor Burke said the issue was too contentious for lawmakers to take on because of animal-rights activists. "No one wants to tackle it," he said. "It's on the level of feral cats."

Ms. Hooker, the South Park Slope homeowner, first spotted a raccoon 11 years ago while brushing her teeth. It was peeking through the skylight "like a masked bandit," she recalled. "But it was just doing reconnaissance."

In the years that followed, raccoons invaded her neighbor's property. Then they came onto hers, drawn by grapevines, berry patches and a peach tree.

At first, she and her husband would "just laugh when we saw three little peach pits in the birdbath," she said, adding, "We figured we had enough peaches for everybody." But once the population began to grow, the attitude changed.

The raccoons rolled back the grass in the yard like a carpet, looking for grubs. They congregated and made noise. "The kits make a weird little kitten-y noise like 'wa-rooo,'" Ms. Hooker said, rolling the "r," "and the mothers screech."

She kept them away for a time with a motion-activated sprinkler, "but," she said, "It does tend to water one's husband when he is taking out the trash."

Her patience ran out in August, after what she called the wilding. She had already called 311 and was asked if she had been bitten. When she said no, she learned she was on her own. She found Don on the Internet.

Don said he had trapped and released more than 30 raccoons last year. He caught eight raccoons and an opossum in Ms. Hooker's yard.

He had told her where he released the animals, she said, but "that's our little secret." They were far enough away that they would not come back, she said.

Don arrived at the secret location just before dark. A well-worn trail led to a stand of trees. He placed a cage on the ground and slid open the back door. For a moment, the animal stood still.

"O.K., Rocky," he said, "You can't stay in there forever, buddy."

The raccoon backed out and loped down the trail.