

Wildlife Living Under a Porch or Deck



Situation: There is a wild animal living under your porch or deck.

Why This Happens: Wild animals survive by constantly searching for and utilizing the resources they find in their environment. They interpret the gap under your deck or the missing board under your porch as a “Welcome” sign. **They are not aware that they are trespassing;** they only know that there is an entry hole that lets them get into a relatively warm, dark, safe and quiet place. For animals like opossums, raccoons, foxes, skunks, and woodchucks a porch or deck forms a ready-made roof under which they feel more secure from danger and protected from the elements. Raccoons and opossums usually like to just curl up as far back from the edge as they can get. Skunks, woodchucks and foxes may dig a burrow in the soil under the deck or porch.

FAQs and Humane Solutions:

“I have an animal living under my deck [or porch]. Will you come out here and remove it, or can I rent a live-trap from you so I can trap it myself?”

The answer to both questions is “No,” **because we have a much better solution to offer:** Experience with thousands of such situations over more than 30 years has shown us that the self-help techniques we describe below are much more humane than trapping and relocating an animal, provide a more ecologically-sound solution than relocation, and are more likely to provide you with a **lasting solution at less expense** than removal/relocation. For more information about our position on relocating wild animals, please see: <http://www.wihumane.org/wildlife/livetraps.aspx>

“There is a family of foxes [or woodchucks, raccoons, opossums, etc.] living under our deck. We don’t really mind; in fact, we enjoy watching them. But are they dangerous? Should we be concerned?”

We have counseled with hundreds of thousands of people over the last three decades who have called us for answers to their questions about backyard wildlife. In all that time, never once did we have someone tell us that a fox, raccoon, opossum, skunk or woodchuck had bitten them or a family member, even when the animal(s) have had babies. So, in our experience, the risk to human safety from an animal living under a deck or porch is very small. **That being said, you should be careful to not corner them, or try to get too close to them, especially their young. And you absolutely, positively, should not feed them!** Providing food for them will get them associate humans with food, and we DO often get calls from people who have wild animals in their neighborhood that are seemingly unafraid of humans, and some that have even become bold in approaching people. This is probably caused by people putting food out for wild mammals, and this is not a good situation for the animal or for people.



Many wild animals seek shelter under decks and porches



Helpless baby animals, like these tiny raccoons, are often orphaned when their mother is trapped and relocated

So we suggest tolerance, first. If you later find that you need to get the animal(s) to move elsewhere, you can use the advice we provide below.

"There is a raccoon [or opossum, woodchuck, fox, etc.] living under my deck. I'd like to get him to leave. What can I do to get him to move along and find someplace else to live?"

If you can't tolerate the animal(s) living there, we recommend that you use a combination of concurrent **"hazing"** and **exclusion**.

1). Hazing involves temporarily converting that dark, safe, quiet wildlife haven under your deck or porch into a **bright, noisy, smelly area** in which the animal no longer feels comfortable or safe. The supplies that will be needed are: a bright light such as a **mechanic's trouble light or a floodlight**, a **portable radio**, and some type of **non-toxic animal repellent such as Critter Ridder** [<http://www.wihumane.org/shop/item.aspx?id=676872>], available through **Wally's Workbench** here at the shelter or on our web site; or rags drenched in **household ammonia**.

Hazing Technique - Set up the light under the deck or porch, ideally **about five feet away from the entrance hole**, and turn it on, shining toward the animal's sleeping area or the entrance to its burrow. **Caution: keep power cords away from the entrance itself or the animal may gnaw on the cord! Make sure the light cannot tip over and that it is not hot enough or close enough to anything flammable that it could start a fire! If possible**, place the radio within several feet of the animal's "den" or about five feet away from the entrance hole. Tune the radio to a talk station or a rock-and-roll station and have it on with the volume turned up as loud as you reasonably can. If possible, place rags drenched in household ammonia or sprinkle the Critter Ridder just under the edge of the deck at the point **where the animal comes and goes** (look for an area where the grass or soil is flattened or worn away) from the deck or porch. **Do NOT put ammonia, Critter Ridder or any other product into the actual burrow or den of an animal!** Any baby animals inside would be unlikely to be able to escape the odors or could be harmed by direct contact with the substance. Shine the light and play the radio starting every day in the evening and going all night. The animal might leave the first night you do this, but you'll probably need to keep this up for a few nights or perhaps longer. The ammonia on the rags will evaporate, so you'll need to re-wet them with fresh ammonia once or twice a day.

Note: hazing works best in **relatively small areas**. In a very large area, such as under a large deck, the animal may simply avoid the hazing techniques by moving its activity away from the hazing to another area under the deck. In this case, you'll need to introduce enough light and noise to make the entire area uninhabitable.

IMPORTANT: In cases where there may be baby animals present, we recommend that if at all possible, you wait until the young are old enough to leave the nesting area on their own before you start hazing. There is a small chance that the hazing could get a mother animal to abandon her young or mistakenly not take all of her young with her when she moves out. In southern Wisconsin, Woodchucks may have young as early as late-April, though May or June is more typical. Raccoons may have young as early as April and as late as September. Foxes usually give birth in April or May. Chipmunks may have two litters per year, starting in May and into June. Skunks may give birth as early as April but more often in May or June.



This worn gap under the deck indicates that an animal habitually comes and goes by this route



A light and radio placed near a burrow under a deck

2). **Exclusion** – Installing an animal-proof barrier around the porch or deck at the same time you are doing the hazing may help encourage the animal to relocate on its own, but will also prevent this animal, or other animals, from setting up housekeeping there in the future. If you don't "animal-proof" the area you are very likely to have another animal eventually move in. By "animal-proofing," we mean installing a barrier that animals cannot chew through, pull apart, dig under, or climb over. **Welded wire mesh, hardware cloth, or chicken wire** are usually good choices for this, since they are strong, long-lasting, easy to work with, are relatively inexpensive and, except for welded wire mesh, are readily available at most hardware stores and home improvement centers. Welded wire mesh can be a little more challenging to find, but it is available from some farm and ranch supply stores, fencing retailers, and online. If you are shopping for welded wire mesh, look for 1" x 1" or 1" x ½" galvanized mesh made with 16 gauge wire.

Materials you will need:

- **Galvanized hardware cloth, or welded wire mesh, or chicken wire**
- **Screws** – we like 1 ¼" galvanized pan-head **lath screws**, but deck screws should also work
- **Fender washers** – we like 1" diameter washers with a 3/16" hole

Tools you will need:

- **Safety glasses**
- **Leather gloves** – to protect your hands from possibly sharp metal edges
- **Cordless drill/screwdriver** with appropriate bit for driving the screws you will be using
- **Wire cutter, or sheet metal cutting shears** (the latter works well for hardware cloth)
- **Long-handle or short-handle round-point shovel**
- **Grub hoe or pick-mattock** – optional for trenching in hard or rocky soil
- **Tape measure**
- **Optional** – for large jobs, you may want to rent an electric sheet-metal and wire-mesh cutting shears. Or, if you are working with welded-wire mesh, use an electric reciprocating saw with a metal-cutting blade to speed-up the mesh-cutting process.

Instructions:

1). **Trenching** -- To keep animals from digging under the barrier you are installing, **you'll need to either dig an approximately 12" deep (or deeper) by 4-6" wide trench around your porch, deck, or shed and bury the lower portion of the wire mesh, or you'll need to extend an "L"-shaped apron of wire mesh on the surface of the ground 12"-18" out from the edge of the deck.** If you choose the latter you'll need to place heavy bricks or rocks on top of the mesh, or use landscape staples to hold it down. You can cover the surface mesh with a layer of soil, gravel, or mulch.

For maximum effectiveness, combine the two methods by burying "L"-shaped mesh in a trench.

WARNING: before trenching, check with your local utility provider to make sure it is safe for you to dig without hitting utility cables or pipes. In Wisconsin, call **Digger's Hotline** at **(800) 242-8511**; or online at **www.diggers hotline.com**.



Welded wire mesh in a trench dug next to a fence that forms one side of a deck. The mesh is screwed to the deck using lath screws and fender washers. The trench is then back-filled with soil



Attaching hardware cloth using a cordless drill/driver, lath screws and fender washers



On the right side of this photo the trench has been back-filled with dirt. On the left side, the trench and mesh are ready for back-fill



Trenching was not possible here, so the "L"- shaped mesh barrier is left above-ground. The mesh will be buried under rocks or soil



Fender washers and lath screws for attaching exclusionary mesh

2). **Install mesh** – Measure and cut pieces of mesh for your application. Bend and shape the mesh as needed to form an "L"; to go around corners; to fit around obstacles, etc.

Use the drill/driver, lath screws and fender washers to **attach the mesh to the lower edge of the deck or porch every 6 to 12 inches**. When attaching mesh to concrete, such as where the deck meets the foundation of a structure, leave a few inches of extra mesh on that end. Bend the mesh into an "L" where it meets the wall and use a masonry drill-bit and anchors made for using screws in concrete to attach the "L"-shaped "tab" on the end of the piece of mesh to the concrete.

If you are using multiple pieces of mesh, be sure to **overlap them** by a couple of inches so that animals can't get through any gaps between pieces of mesh.

IMPORTANT: at this point **do not** completely mesh-in the entire perimeter of the deck! Look for the place that the animal comes and goes from under the porch or deck. This spot usually has worn-down soil, grass or other vegetation from the animal's coming and going. **Leave an opening in the mesh large-enough for the animal in question to come and go from under the deck or porch**. You will not close this opening until you are absolutely sure that no animals are still under the deck.

3). **Begin Hazing** -- (see above for method). Continue for 2 or three nights, then test to see if the animal(s) have moved out (see 4).

4). **Newspaper Test** – Loosely crumple several sheets of newspaper into a ball and stuff the ball into the opening you've left in the mesh around your deck. Then check the paper daily for the next three days to see if it has been removed from the hole. If the ball of paper has been removed, it means the animal is still using that entrance/exit. You'll then need to continue the hazing techniques for a couple of more days and then try the Newspaper Test again. Repeat until you are satisfied that no animals remain under the deck or porch.



Trimming welded wire mesh with a wire cutter. Wear safety glasses when cutting mesh

Another option for checking to see if the animal has left is a **“trail camera.”** These highly weather-resistant digital cameras automatically take a photo(s) or a clip of digital video when something passes in front of the camera. These cameras are sold at sporting goods stores and online. The camera should be placed so that the “shutter” will be triggered by an animal going in or out of the opening under the structure.

5). **Closure** – once you are **sure** that no animals remain under the deck, **securely close the opening** you had left in the mesh.

6). **Monitoring** -- After you’ve repaired and animal-proofed your deck or porch, **check back at least twice a day for at least the next three days** to make sure that no animals have accidentally been closed inside. and are unable to get out!*

A Note About One-way Doors – a one-way door (available online) is a device that lets an animal get out from under the deck or porch but not get back in through that door. **A one-way door must NOT be used unless you are absolutely positive that there are no baby animals under the deck or porch.**

A one-way door would be used by installing it in the opening you’ve left in the mesh. A smear of peanut butter is placed on the inside surface of the door to attract the animal’s attention and help it discover that the door pushes open easily. Once the animal goes out the door, it will not be able to get back in. When you are **SURE** that all animals have exited the door you can remove the door and close the opening in the mesh.

With a one way door installed, **if you see an animal desperately and persistently trying to get back into the excluded area**, it may have babies inside. In this case, prop the one way door open for a day or two and resume hazing. This will give the “mom” animal an opportunity to move her young to a new location.

***Caution: be very careful using a one-way door or the Newspaper Test to try to detect animal activity during the late fall, winter, and early spring.** Some animals hibernate and others greatly reduce their activity and “hole-up” in a safe, relatively warm place for days or even weeks at a time when it is very cold or when there is deep snow. **Do not** do permanent repairs or install an animal-proof barrier until you are **SURE** that no animals will be trapped inside!

“I don’t really want to go to all of the trouble of installing the exclusion mesh. Can’t I just do the hazing techniques to get the animal to leave?”

Yes, you could try just doing the hazing without the exclusion. However, sooner or later you are likely to have another animal, or maybe even the same animal, move in after you stop the hazing.



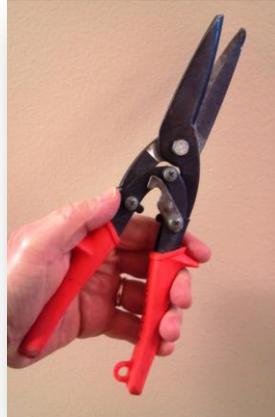
A one-way door (arrow) and exclusionary mesh installed on an opossum entry under a deck built on a slope



Critter Ridder is a non-toxic, pepper-based, granular animal repellent that may help with hazing. This product is available here at the shelter or on our web site: <http://shop.wihumane.org/store/product/critter-ridder>



When using welded-wire mesh, renting a metal-cutting shears can help considerably if you are cutting lots of mesh for a big job, such as a very large deck



Long-jawed tin snips make it easy to cut hardware cloth



Temporarily removing a few deck boards over the location an animal likes to sleep can encourage it to give up on that location. Adding a light source like the trouble-light shown here (arrow) may provide additional incentive for the animal to move out. Be sure to cordon-off the area so someone doesn't step into, or fall into, the opening.



Baby animals like this Red Fox kit are orphaned when someone traps and relocates their parents.

Tolerance for their presence, or using our hazing and exclusion methods, helps assure these animals are treated with respect and kindness



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*The Wisconsin Humane Society is a charitable organization that depends entirely on donations to fulfill its mission to create a community that values animals and treats them with respect and kindness. Your support for the WHS Wildlife Rehabilitation Center makes possible the distribution of information like this to thousands of people who request it each year, and makes possible the humane care of over 5,000 injured, sick, and orphaned wild animals from our community each year. You may **donate** online at www.wihumane.org/donate.aspx or by mailing a check to the following address: WHS Wildlife Center, 4500 W. Wisconsin Avenue, Milwaukee, WI 53208*