

## Critter-proof your home

### Wildlife looking for a home to roost

By Joshua Freeman Londoner

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As the weather gets cooler and the heat comes on in homes everywhere, humans aren't the only one's who'll be looking to find themselves a cozy place to take shelter from winter.

And if you don't take precautions, a furry critter just may decide he'd like to wait out winter at your house.

"They know the temperature change is coming," says Bill Dowd, president and founder of Humane Wildlife Control. "Animals are more in tune to the shortening of the days."

That means they'll be looking for a nice place to stay warm. And what's more, Dowd says, furry creatures like squirrels, raccoons and skunks don't just look for one place. In warmer weather, they may have as many as seven or eight regular sites they consider their homes, although they cut down in winter.

"They realize they need to hunker down in a smaller number of den sites — three or four rather than five to seven," Dowd says. "That's just how they survive in the urban landscape these days... Any home that exhausts warm air will be a magnet."

Chimneys, warm plumbing, air vents and attics are especially attractive.

And if you've had an occasional visitor, they may decide it's time to spend more quality time at your house, meaning they could wreak havoc on insulation, cause damage to screens and even leave fecal matter with dangerous parasites near air vents.

"Heating and cooling costs continue to rise," Dowd points out. "It costs you more as a homeowner if they ruin your insulation."

So even if you haven't had much trouble with critters before, Dowd says there are some simple steps homeowners can take to make sure they aren't visited by furry freeloaders.

They include cleaning out eavestroughs, screening your chimney and air vents and making sure there are no entry points in your roof where critters can infiltrate.

Even if it seems like there aren't that many animals running around your neighbourhood, Dowd warns there's a populous world of animals often invisible to the human eye.

Dowd, who last year worked with David Suzuki on a documentary about raccoons, says there are typically 15 to 25 raccoons per square kilometre in any urbanized area. And a recent study estimated the number of raccoons in downtown Toronto to be even higher, more like 50 per square kilometer.

Dowd says downtown Toronto's no different from downtown Ottawa or London when it comes to critters.

"People just don't realize what goes on in the dead of the night," he says. "They're out there. Animal proofing your home — that's the solution. We're never going to get rid of the wildlife — they're out there."

He added if people suspect they have an intruder, they should contact a humane, hands-on wildlife company instead of using traps, which can result in painful, protracted deaths for animals who are caught.

[josh.freeman@sunmedia.ca](mailto:josh.freeman@sunmedia.ca)

Twitter: JoshatLondoner