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Selecting a Nuisance Wildlife Control Professional

It's likely you have had some type of run-in with wildlife—no matter where you live. Regardless of the situation, you have essentially three choices when you deal with a wildlife problem. You can

- ignore the problem and hope it goes away (not the best choice!),
- fix the problem yourself, or
- hire someone to fix the problem for you.

Even if you want to fix things yourself, you may find that the situation warrants professional assistance. Or, you may simply want to hire someone because you don't have time to deal with the problem, you aren't sure what is causing the problem, or you are unable or unwilling to do the job yourself. The question then becomes, "Who can help?"

This publication provides information about nuisance wildlife control professionals, things to consider when deciding whether or not you need to hire a professional, and tips on how to find a professional who is right for you.

Do I need a professional?

This is a common question from homeowners. The answer really depends on your skills and resources. The situation is similar to other maintenance and repair problems you deal with on a regular basis. You may have the knowledge, time, skill, and equipment to fix things yourself. Or, you may not, and may choose to hire out the job.

From a wildlife perspective, your need for a professional depends on the type of problem you have. You likely will want professional help for situations that need immediate



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attention, solutions that require specialized equipment, or problems with high complexity or uncertainty.

Some problems are simply more urgent than others. For example, birds can enter a large box store through the automatic sliding doors. If the store sells or serves food inside, that business needs to remove the birds as soon as possible because of the associated human health risks and code violations. This example has an additional element of complexity, since the work needs to be done around a functioning business and sometimes during business hours. From a homeowner's perspective, a tree squirrel getting in the living space or attic requires immediate action.

Other problems are not so urgent. Mole damage to lawns, while very common, does not require immediate action, because damage is sporadic (Figure 1). There is also no urgent human health issue, no noise keeping people up at night, and no damage that is technically difficult or expensive to repair. You may be willing to be patient and deal with the problem yourself. Or, you may view the situation differently and hire a professional immediately.



Figure 1. Many wildlife conflicts, like the tunneling and digging from moles pictured above, do not pose a health threat or require immediate action.

Your level of skill and/or specialized equipment is also a factor. It doesn't take much skill to set a box trap to catch a groundhog that has been feeding in your garden. With just a little basic training, most homeowners can do this. It does, however, take a lot of skill and equipment to remove bats from a structure, clean up the bat guano, and exclude bats from the structure properly to keep them from returning. I never recommend that homeowners do this type of work themselves because of the skills required. In fact, it is such a highly specialized part of nuisance wildlife control work, most companies do not do this type of work.

A good clue to how difficult some problems are to deal with is to simply look at the lists of services companies provide. You generally find the "easier" types of services on most service companies' lists, while the more difficult services are offered by relatively fewer companies.

What is a nuisance wildlife control professional?

If you are considering hiring a nuisance wildlife control professional, it is helpful to know what kind of training they've had. Many wildlife control professionals have some type of formal or informal training in working with wildlife. Because there isn't a lot of emphasis placed on nuisance wildlife control in undergraduate wildlife curricula within higher education, training is mostly industry-driven through state and national trade organizations. The Indiana Animal Damage Control Association provides professional training in Indiana.

At the national level, the *Wildlife Control Technology* magazine created a training conference held annually since 1995. This inspired the creation of the National Wildlife Control Operators Association (NWCOA), the national professional organization that sponsors and organizes annual education programs for their members at the national level. The National Pest Management Association (NPMA) is another group that offers some training in wildlife control, although their focus is broader and includes invertebrate pest control. Members of these groups work together with the Cooperative Extension Service as well as with state and federal agencies to provide many of these training programs.

Nuisance wildlife control professionals are not simply trappers, although having the skill to capture and handle a wide variety of wildlife species is important. They must also have a working knowledge of animal behavior and biology to understand why animals do what they do. This also helps them develop a plan that includes exclusion, behavioral modification, trapping and/or removing animals, and environmental modifications to reduce attractive habitat features. They oftentimes need to have minimal to basic carpentry and repair skills to fix structural damage caused by wildlife and to exclude them, so they or their "cousins" cannot reenter a structure; some companies subcontract out this type of work.

Nuisance wildlife professionals have the skill and capacity to clean and sanitize living spaces and structures contaminated by animal waste or even decomposing carcasses. They receive special immunizations and health care because of the exposure risk to diseases that can be transmitted from wildlife to humans. They, of course, must have all the required licenses and permits required by law.

They have to have basic accounting and marketing skills to run a business. And perhaps most importantly, they must have good people skills to work with clients.

What about regulations and professional certification?

It's hard to believe, but thirty to forty years ago wildlife damage was not on most folks' radar. Many states, including Indiana, at that time were trying to increase populations of wildlife such as white-tailed deer and Canada geese. To address the growing nuisance wildlife problem, since then many states adapted existing wildlife laws and permits. Wild animals are protected by state laws. These laws vary from state to state, and can change over time. Most birds (e.g., raptors, songbirds, and waterfowl) and federally endangered species are also protected by federal law (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Geese and other migratory birds are protected by federal laws. Solutions to conflicts require a different approach and, sometimes, special permits.

States license individuals to provide nuisance wildlife control services to the public. In Indiana, individuals must be licensed by the state if they provide public service or charge a fee for their nuisance wildlife control services when that service involves the capture, handling, or killing of regulated species of mammals, reptiles, and nonmigratory birds. These operators are issued a Nuisance Wild Animal Control Permit by the Indiana Department of Natural Resources (DNR). This is actually the same permit issued to any individual to trap or kill certain species of protected wildlife. However, those providing wildlife control services for hire or as a public service also must pass a state-administered test before obtaining this permit.

A separate Pesticide Applicator's license is required to use toxicants and other labeled drugs. Pesticide applicator's licenses are issued by the Office of Indiana State Chemist. Contact the appropriate agency for more information.

When selecting and hiring a nuisance wildlife control professional, there are a few key terms to know.

Licenses – According to my trusty *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* (1989), a license is a document, granted by competent authority, that an individual can engage in a business or occupation or conduct an activity that otherwise would be unlawful.

Permit – A permit is a written license granted by the proper authority.

Certification – A certification is the state of being certified, to attest or authorize as meeting a standard. As an example, I am a Certified Wildlife Biologist® through the Wildlife Society, the national professional association for wildlife biologists. This certification constitutes recognition that I meet the minimum educational, experience, and ethical standards adopted by the Wildlife Society. In a similar way, the NWCOA offers a certification program for wildlife control companies and individuals.

How do I find a nuisance wildlife control professional?

Now that you know about nuisance wildlife control professionals and the licensing requirements, the next step is locating one in your area. Unfortunately, there is no searchable database where you can enter your location/county and get a list of nearby licensed operators, but the DNR Division of Fish and Wildlife maintains a current list of licensed operators on their website. Keep in mind that wildlife operators whose work does not involve the capture, handling, or killing of regulated mammals, reptiles, and non-migratory birds (e.g., a company who only does mole control) may not be listed here because a license for that work is not required by law. The list maintained by the DNR is a PDF document that sorts individuals by their primary county of operation. It also includes the individual's name, business name, animals controlled, services provided, telephone number, and other counties served. This 21-page document (when accessed on November 17, 2015) contains many names and locations.

Searching within the DNR's List of Wildlife Control Professionals

The majority of individuals on the DNR list serve multiple counties, so it may be difficult to find ones that work in your area. One way of finding them in the DNR's PDF is to type "control-F" at the same time to open a "find box." Type in your county name to highlight that county wherever it appears in the document and then navigate to that county within the document.

You can do the same thing by name or business if you want to find contact information for a particular individual or company. The NWCOA website also lists members by state. This list is not an exhaustive list of state licensed operators; there were only 20 individuals listed for Indiana (when accessed on November 17, 2015). Many operators choose not to be members of the National Wildlife Control Operators Association. There is no legal requirement to be a NWCOA member and operate a lawful wildlife control operation (see **certification** in the box on page 3).

Clearly you will want to hire a company that is properly licensed and insured. Beyond that, once you identify the list of potential operators you will need to determine which one to hire. Here are some things to consider during this process.

- Get multiple quotes—Before most folks buy a new car or new roof for their house, they shop around a bit. The same should be true for wildlife control work. Contact two or three different companies. They should ask you a series of questions to help them determine the services you actually require. If they determine that you have a wildlife problem, most will offer an approximate pricing structure over the phone. If they come out to do a site assessment, which is usually required to give a complete and accurate quote, most companies will charge a service fee.
- Pricing the job—This is always a major consideration. When you are comparing the cost of bids from different operators, be sure you are comparing equal services. Some quotes may or may not include the required structural repairs. Not all guarantee their work on these repairs. Some companies charge per animal, others charge per job and/or number of times they have to return.

- Ask for references—You are not the first one with wildlife problems. Ask them for a reference or two for similar work. You may also talk with neighbors and friends about wildlife control companies they have hired in the past. If you have raccoons in your attic, chances are someone else in your area does, too.
- Choose the company right for you—There is no easy way to determine this, and it's really a matter of personal preference. Answers to the following questions may provide some insights on which company is best for you.
 - Can they explain the basic biology and behavior of the animal?
 - Do they look over the entire house/structure or area of damage?
 - What is their work experience?
 - What is their policy regarding nontarget animal catches?
 - Do they do structural work themselves or do they hire that out (Figure 3)? If they hire it out, is that company licensed and insured, too? If they do the structural work themselves, is it professional quality?
 - Do they offer a guarantee for structural repairs? If so, what does it specifically cover, and how long does the guarantee last?
 - Do they offer a maintenance service?



Figure 3. Wildlife can damage houses and other structures. Nuisance wildlife control operators usually either repair the damage themselves or subcontract that work to another business.

- **Contracts and payment**—When you decide on a company, ask for a written estimate that outlines services you are receiving for payment. However, keep in mind that most wildlife control companies only do verbal contracts for basic work. Written contracts are typically limited to commercial work or especially complex jobs. Whether or not the contract is verbal or written, you and the operator should agree upon the cost of services including deposit, if applicable, and the amount due and method of payment when the agreed upon services are completed. Most professional service industries, including nuisance wildlife control, do not require full payment up front.
- **Be part of the solution**—Work with the operator to identify the problem and understand the agreed-upon method of resolution. Wildlife conflicts sometimes have several potential solutions. You and the operator should discuss all activities associated with the job, including set-up, trap checks, repairs, and future warranties or maintenance. Also, determine who from the company will conduct the work on your property and when.
- **Your responsibilities**—An agreement may require you to follow certain procedures regarding traps and how or when to communicate with the company following the initial set-up. Traps are set a certain way at specific locations to maximize the likelihood of catching the target animal while also avoiding non-target animals. Moving traps or tampering with them can reduce their effectiveness or even be dangerous. However, companies will likely ask the homeowner to check, without touching, the traps every day. If an animal is caught, you will be required to call the company or technician who will remove the animal and reset the trap. Under no circumstances should you ever release a trapped animal unless instructed to do so by the professional who set the trap.
- **Expectations after the job is complete**—There are almost never any permanent solutions to wildlife conflicts. Most species we have conflicts with are those that are relatively abundant. Removing an animal from a structure or pond, for example, does not guarantee another won't eventually take its place.
- **Reducing your costs**—Most companies will let you do the repair work yourself after they have completed their work. Keep in mind this may void any exclusion

warranty. In some cases, you may just need to know what kind of problem you have and how to deal with it. Some companies may charge a bit more above their standard onsite service fee to develop a specific plan on how you can do it yourself.

Final considerations

The nuisance wildlife business is booming and business tends to get very busy at certain times of year. The busy time of year for a company depends on what services they provide. It can be difficult to talk with someone during these times. When you narrow your list of companies down to two or three, put calls out to all of them. Only one may call you back.

Many businesses depend on the Internet as a primary means of advertising. This is certainly true for many nuisance wildlife control businesses, but not for all. In fact, many do not have websites and advertise very little, if at all. These companies get their business from return customers and word of mouth. So, just because you can't find a company website doesn't mean that company is not a reputable business.

Finally, many companies provide pest control for insects. The permitting system for these companies is different than for wildlife control. They may or may not have the required Nuisance Wild Animal Control Permit from the DNR. Approaches for dealing with wildlife issues and insect issues are also very different in many ways. Just as you would research your options for a nuisance wildlife control professional, you would need to do your homework and follow the suggestions above if you choose to consider a pest control company.

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Additional Resources

Preventing Wildlife Damage—Do You Need a Permit?
Purdue University Cooperative Extension Service
publication, FNR-404-W.

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