
CHAPTER 12

VERTEBRATES

Most wild mammals, birds, reptiles and amphibians are beneficial and desirable around water bodies. Some, however, may conflict with the interests of riparians (those who live adjacent to water bodies) or aquaculture businesses, and you may be asked for advice on how to manage these animals.

Just as regulations and permits are required for your pesticide application procedures, other regulations govern handling wildlife. If you're asked a nuisance wildlife management question, you should first refer the person to an agency experienced in fisheries and wildlife issues or suggest reliable resources for finding the answer.

In the past, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service responded to wildlife nuisance calls, but the overwhelming number of requests has made it impossible for the limited number of field staff members to service such requests. County animal control divisions should be the first agency contacted. Depending on the county, these offices may loan or rent live traps for persons to use to trap and relocate living animals. A few county offices may pick up the trapped nuisance animal and relocate or euthanize it (destroy it in a humane manner).

In urban areas, private businesses provide various types of animal management services. The local county animal control centers may refer you to these businesses. There are several excellent written resources you could suggest, also. The appendix in the back of this manual lists several of these references. The following discussion will give you some tips that the landowner can try before seeking additional help.

If you need help with an injured or sick animal or one that may be suffering from pesticide poisoning, you can seek assistance from the National Wildlife Rehabilitators Association (NWRA). NWRA is an organization of dedicated, knowledgeable people who care for thousands of injured, orphaned, poisoned or diseased wild animals each year. Members of the NWRA meet minimum standards and go through an accreditation

program in wildlife rehabilitation. The central office for NWRA is based in Minnesota. By calling the NWRA office — (612) 437-9194 — you can get the name and number of a member close to your location who may assist you. The International Wildlife Rehabilitation Council (IWRC) may also be able to provide assistance with an injured or sick animal. The IWRC's telephone hotline is operated daily — (707) 864-1762.

When attempting to manage nuisance animals or alter their behavior, the first thing to recognize is that animal damage controls may not be 100 percent effective or permanent. The suggestions listed here should help reduce the damage but may need to be repeated.

Muskrats and Woodchucks

Muskrats and woodchucks dig burrows that can cause pond bank cave-ins and may weaken dams or result in leaks. They prefer to dig in steep banks. Muskrats burrow from beneath the pond surface, while woodchucks typically tunnel into the downstream side of dams.



Keeping earthen dams mowed reduces cover that woodchucks and muskrats like. Removing cattails, arrowhead, and other emergent plants deprives muskrats of food and cover. Armoring the shore with rock and other hard materials will discourage burrowing.

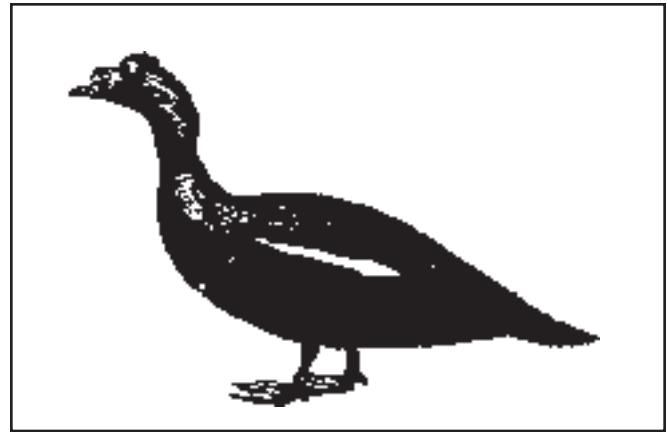
Controlling a muskrat population is usually feasible only if the water body is far from other muskrat habitat. If it's near other waterways or wetlands, muskrats will continually move in. In such cases, it may be better to control the damage by reinforcing the embankments rather than trying to control the muskrats.

Birds

Several kinds of fish-eating birds may reduce fish populations in ponds. Kingfishers, herons, mergansers and domestic muskvy ducks are notable predators. All of these can be scared away by noise-making devices. Floppy scarecrows, large rubber snakes, and owl or hawk decoys can also be used to scare birds away. These decoys must be positioned imaginatively and moved often.



Kingfisher



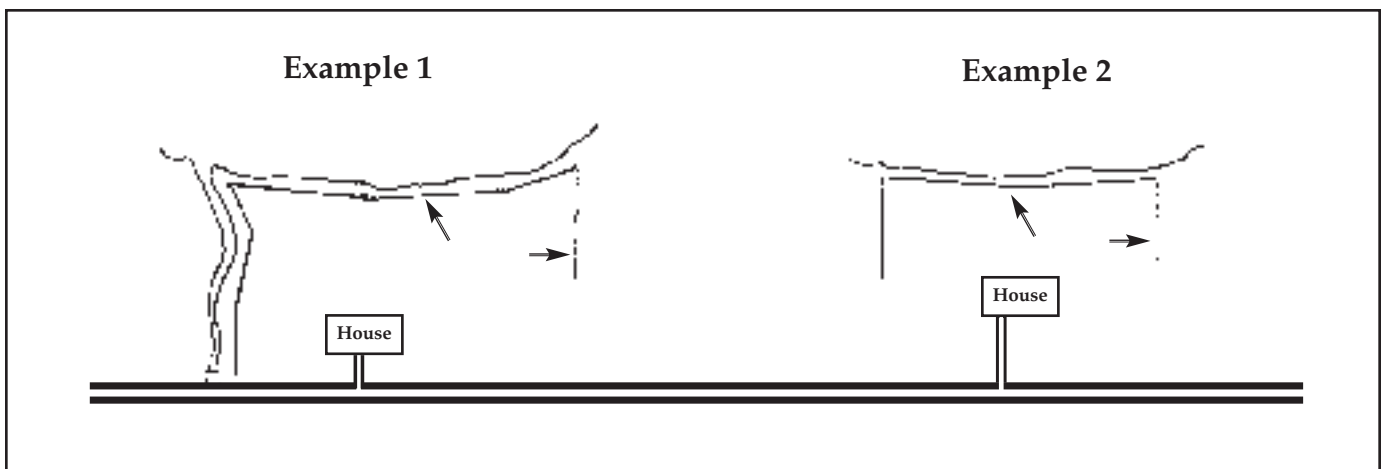
Muskvy duck

Discourage herons by deepening pond edges to form steep underwater slopes. Three feet of horizontal distance per foot of drop is the maximum slope recommended for safety.

Discourage kingfishers by removing all perches such as posts and dead tree limbs close to the pond. If muskvy ducks are kept at the pond, confine them to a small part of it.

Geese, gulls and some duck species can become nuisances by feeding on lawns and depositing significant amounts of feces. String or bird repellent tape can be strung to discourage the geese and ducks from entering the yard. String must be strong. Bird repellent tape is red and silver aluminum foil coated with mylar. Its physical presence, the flashing colors, the noise it makes when the wind blows, its strength and its ease of application make it an ideal tool for managing bird damage in certain situations.

In yards, stretch the string or tape along the waterfront of the yard and up both sides, 6 inches above the ground for ducks and 15 inches above the ground for geese. Use whatever convenient supports the yard provides: trees, shrubs, posts, etc.



Properly placing bird repellent tape can help keep ducks and geese from becoming a nuisance.

If using the mylar bird repellent tape, give each section of tape a few twists. Put the barrier up as soon as possible after the ice melts. Immediately harass (bang on pots, shout and wave your arms while running toward them) any ducks or geese that cross the tape or string. Inspect and repair the barrier daily.

Large, tethered helium-filled balloons have proven effective in repelling blackbirds, ducks, geese, gulls and sandhill cranes from small agricultural fields and may be worth trying on a waterfront property to keep nuisance birds off of docks, swimming platforms and pontoon boats. The balloons must be moved periodically so that the birds do not become familiar with them and lose their fear.



Canada geese may be undesirable when they deposit excessive amounts of feces on lawns or uproot grass plants.

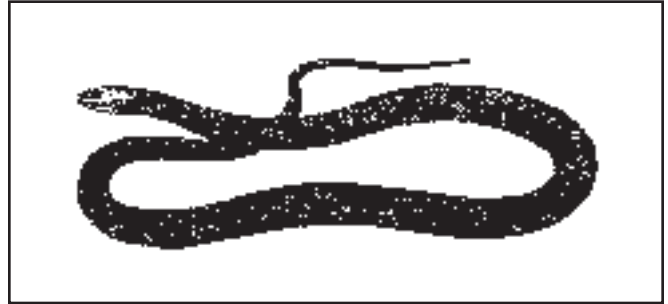
Ducks, geese and water birds can be carriers of diseases other than swimmer's itch. They can also significantly increase fecal coliform bacteria counts and add nutrients to the lake.

Harassing these birds excessively may be a violation of the Migratory Bird Act. Contact a regional MDNR wildlife biologist or the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to learn more about this law, your actions and your responsibility. Shooting these birds without proper licensing or shooting out of season can lead to criminal prosecution.

Snakes

Snakes are beneficial animals that are extremely unlikely to cause harm to humans. In fact, some are protected. Some people, however, consider the mere presence of snakes a nuisance. Fish-eating water snakes may take up residence near a pond,

especially when a stream is nearby. Water snakes usually pose problems only for trout and minnows.

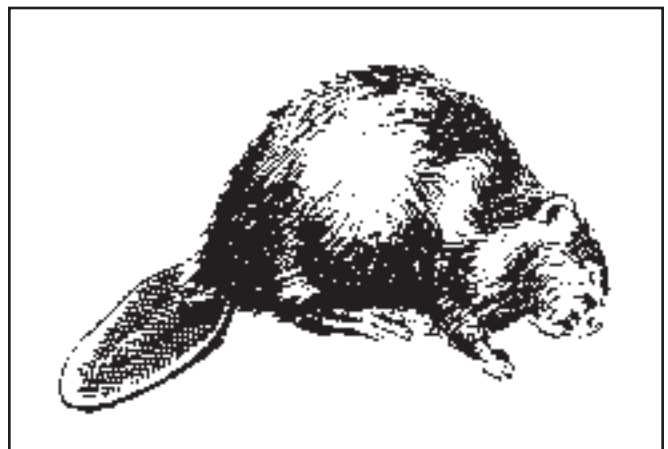


Mowing pond bank vegetation and removing logs, tree roots, branches and large stones from the shoreline reduces the habitat for water snakes. The mowing, however, may reduce the advantage of having a vegetational buffer strip to filter nutrients and silt out of runoff water. Leaving an unmowed buffer behind the mowed section is recommended to optimize the filtering capacity of the vegetation strip.

Beaver

The beaver is well adapted for aquatic environments and may be found anywhere there is a year-round source of water. Most damage caused by beaver is a result of dam building or tree cutting.

A single tree or shrub can be protected from beaver damage by encircling it with securely fastened wire mesh. Stucco wire or other stiff products are preferred; common chicken wire, unless well staked, is usually too light to do the job. The wire must be at least 30 inches high and larger than 2-inch mesh wire.



For detailed information on keeping culverts free of beaver dams and managing pond or stream levels with existing beavers and beaver dams, obtain the MDNR publication "Nuisance Beaver Control" from a district DNR office.

Chapter 12 – Vertebrate Review Questions

Write the answers to the following questions, and then check your answers with those in the back of this manual.

1. What can be done to reduce muskrat and woodchuck populations?
 - a. Plant cattails, which are muskrat deterrents.
 - b. Remove rocks from the shore to reduce their hiding places.
 - c. Steepen the banks of the river or pond.
 - d. Keep earthen dams mowed to reduce cover.
2. In a muskrat-infested area, it is better to control the muskrats than to try to prevent damage they cause. True or False?
3. What should be done to a pond to discourage herons?
4. Which of the following is not a suitable method for removing or discouraging birds?
 - a. Shooting foreign birds.
 - b. Noise-making devices.
 - c. Stretching bird repellent tape along the waterfront.
 - d. Helium balloons.
5. Several species of water snakes are harmful to humans and fish. True or False?
6. _____ can be fastened around a tree or shrub to protect it from beaver damage.
7. If you need help with an injured or sick animal or one that may be suffering from pesticide poisoning, what two organizations could you call?
8. Can you expect animal damage controls to be 100 percent effective or permanent when attempting to manage nuisance animals or alter their behavior?
Yes or No?
9. Ducks, geese and water birds can be carriers of other diseases besides swimmer's itch. True or False?
10. What is a disadvantage of mowing pond bank vegetation to reduce water snake habitat?