

METRO

Forest-preserve raccoons seeking food, water in city

Drought and a ruined berry crop are driving a new population into the neighborhood

By Kelly Kennedy
Tribune staff reporter

A combination of the drought and a late freeze has sent Chicago's raccoons foraging for food and water in unusual places.

Like McDonald's. "There was a late freeze just when many of our wild fruity trees and bushes were budding," said Robert Frazee, a natural resources educator from the University of Illinois Extension service. "When the berries didn't set on, it became really hard to find food, so the raccoons have been raiding many of the towns and villages."

The masked marauders are stealing cat and dog food right off porches, just before digging through the garbage. They're tearing shingles off roofs to look for bugs. And they love well-manicured lawns; those high-tech sprinkler systems flush earthworms to the surface. Some raccoons are even addicted to the same fast food as humans.

Usually, these raccoons live in Chicago's forest preserves and eat what they're supposed to, with some Dumpster diving added in. But with natural sources of water drying up and no berries to supplement picnic leftovers, they are slipping out of the forests and into back yards.

Beyond being a nuisance, the change in habits may affect other animal populations. When raccoons can't find raspberries, they snack on turtle and songbird eggs, as well as little critters such as salamanders and mice.

The change isn't good for the raccoons, either.

"We've gotten far more calls this year than we have in the past 10 years," Frazee said. "And we're seeing a lot more road kill."

That's how officials realized they had a problem.

Raccoons have always lived in Chicago and its suburbs—the state issued 15,465 nuisance permits to control raccoons just in northeastern Illinois last year—but there is a difference between the normal city slickers and their forest cousins hitting the town this year.

Frazee expects the drought to bring in forest preserve raccoons in addition to the raccoons that always reside in attics, garages and abandoned buildings.

The Illinois Department of Natural Resources has tracked up to 101 raccoons per square mile in some areas of Cook, Kane and McHenry Counties. Experts say the Chicago area may be even more popular among raccoons than other big cities because just over 11 percent of Cook County lies in forest preserves.

Stanley Gehrt, a natural resources professor at Ohio State University, has been tracking raccoons in some Chicago-area parks and preserves since 1994. "We think Chicago may be unique because of the high amount of people, but also because of the large amounts of really good raccoon habitat," he said.

The puddles and ponds in the natural settings of the preserves are drying up during the drought, and raccoons depend heavily on water, Gehrt said. Thousands of years ago, they lived in tropical climates. They use their paws to dig through muddy water for food.

"If you watch them, they're usually searching with their paws and looking around elsewhere," Gehrt said. "They still, even though they are very adaptable, have a high water requirement or they face dire consequences—especially when it gets hot."

Under normal conditions, raccoons spread out, said Gehrt, who tracked Chicago's raccoons using special collars. But during a drought, they concentrate around permanent water sources, such as retaining pools and birdbaths. They also change their eating habits.

"They usually eat berries and other vegetation. But they'll easily shift, when they're hungry, to salamanders and frogs," he said. "They've even been known to eat grasshoppers, snakes and turtles. And the turtle populations in Illinois are declining."

But raccoon numbers are going up.



Tribune photo by Bonnie Trafelet
Cook County Animal Control Officer Frank Pierson removes a raccoon from a trailer park in Des Plaines over the weekend. More raccoons are heading to populated areas to find food.

Prevent damage by keeping raccoons away

- Obtain a nuisance permit before attempting to trap raccoons
- Use elastic bands to secure garbage-can lids
- Use mesh-wire fencing to seal off chimneys, and underneath porches and decks
- Keep pet food and water dishes indoors, especially at night
- Don't feed the raccoons
- Install chimney caps

- Repair broken, weak or rotted areas of roofs, soffits and fascias
 - Install hardware cloth inside attic vent and fan openings
 - Trim tree branches that allow easy access to the roof
- For more information, visit <http://dnr.state.il.us/orc/wildlife/furbearers/raccoon.htm>

Source: Illinois Department of Natural Resources

'When the berries didn't set on [in the spring], it became really hard to find food, so the raccoons have been raiding many of the towns and villages.'

—Robert Frazee, natural resources educator

"Resources for animal control have more than doubled in the past decade, and raccoons are at the top of the list," said Bob Bluett, wildlife diversity program manager for the natural resources department. But the numbers seem to be stabilizing, he added.

Gehrt said he analyzed whether the increase had to do with the decline of hunting. In the 1970s, pelts sold for \$30 each. Between 150,000 and 200,000 raccoons per year were trapped for their fur in Illinois. By the 1990s, Gehrt said, that number had gone down to 50,000 per year. Pelts sell for between \$8 and \$11 now.

Since the 1970s, raccoons have learned to live with humans, and Frazee said humans can learn to live with raccoons, too. In his yard, bushes and trees invite wildlife in.

"Everybody has a different tolerance," he said. "Raccoons do have claws, they do have teeth, and they do carry rabies. But most of the time, they're not around during the day."

But usually, it's the damage that's the problem.

John Hagan, owner of Animal Control Specialists in Northbrook, said he tries to discourage people from bringing him in for a raccoon messing with the garbage or living in a tree.

"You can cure your garbage-can problem," he said. "We do encourage people to use us to get raccoons out of the house."

By state law, captured raccoons must be either released within 100 yards of where they were caught, or they must be euthanized. In 2003 the state issued 13,669 nuisance permits. Of those, 694 of the animals caught

were released. The rest were destroyed.

Gehrt said city raccoons caught in attics or chimneys tend to head right back to someone's home after being released in a forest preserve.

But this year's raccoons may behave differently. The forest raccoons will probably visit the city for food and water, then wander back home, Gehrt said. "If they were born and raised in human developments, they haven't learned how to live in trees and eat berries," Gehrt said. "But I think most of them will go back into the woods if that's what they've been raised up to do."

But people can't tell whether a raccoon they spot is a city dweller or forest dweller.

"If they're not causing any immediate damage, I'd encourage people to be patient," Gehrt said.

Raccoons are protected animals, so homeowners must obtain nuisance permits from the Illinois Department of Wildlife to get rid of them.

"The first thing people think about is getting out the shotgun or rifles," Frazee said. "Well, that's not legal."

Look under "animal removal" in the telephone book, he recommends.

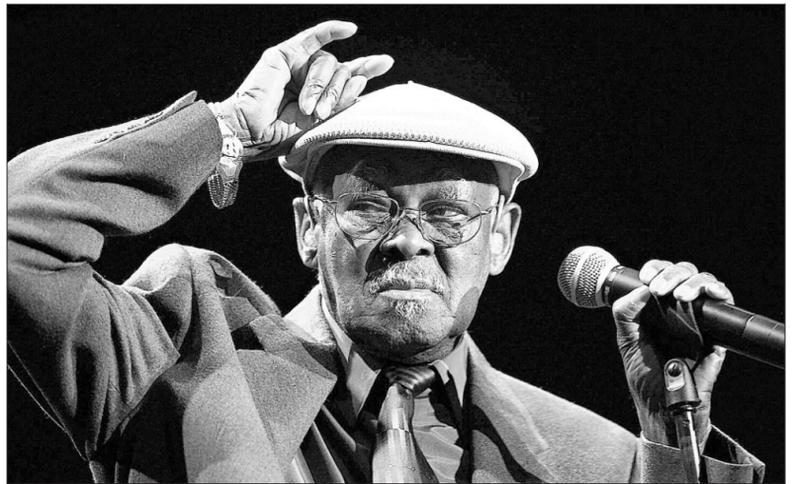
But even better, the experts agree, is prevention. Keep garbage can lids on tightly, don't leave pet food out and block off any holes where raccoons can enter homes.

"Very few people do it before it's a problem," Hagan said. "But if you work on prevention, the raccoons don't have to be trapped and euthanized."

kkennedy@tribune.com

OBITUARIES

Ibrahim Ferrer | 1927 ~ 2005



Getty/AFP photo by Jaime Razuri
Singer Ibrahim Ferrer, performing in Peru in June, helped to introduce new generations to Cuban music of the 1940s and '50s through the Buena Vista Social Club.

Vintage voice of Cuba's traditional music

Singer found global fame late in his life through the popular Buena Vista Social Club albums, documentary

Associated Press

HAVANA — Ibrahim Ferrer, a leading voice with the hugely popular Buena Vista Social Club of vintage Cuban performers, died Saturday, his representative in Cuba said. He was 78.

The Montuno production company did not give a cause of death, but the singer's colleagues said he suffered from emphysema and was feeling ill earlier in the week.

Known for his trademark cap and graying mustache, Mr. Ferrer was a wiry, animated figure who clearly enjoyed performing Cuba's traditional *son* music of the 1940s and 1950s for new generations of fans.

Among a group of older Cuban performers recruited by U.S. musician Ry Cooder, Mr. Ferrer performed on the popular "Buena Vista Social Club" album that won a Grammy in 1998, and was featured in the Wim Wenders documentary of the same name in 1999.

"I felt like he was my brother," said fellow Buena

Vista performer, guitarist Manuel Galban. "He was a great musician and a great companion."

Also in 1999, Mr. Ferrer was featured in one of a string of albums that followed the film, "Buena Vista Social Club Presents Ibrahim Ferrer," and won a Latin Grammy for best new artist in 2000.

Two other well-known members of the original Buena Vista group, singer Compay Segundo and pianist Ruben Gonzalez, died in 2003.

In 1996, Cooder, an American, traveled to Cuba for a project that would have brought together members of the old guard of Cuban roots music and African guitarists. But the Africans had passport problems and weren't able to get into Cuba. So Cooder decided to bring the aging musicians into a Havana studio.

Forgotten by Cuba's socialist government because they had once belonged to a past now considered capitalist and immoral, and passed over by record companies

looking for new and younger blood, musicians such as Mr. Ferrer had given up on music and gone on to support themselves through manual labor. Nonetheless, they had never lost their musical touch or the sheer joy that comes from playing.

Originally from Cuba's eastern city of Santiago, Mr. Ferrer was born in 1927 during a dance at a social club after his mother unexpectedly went into labor.

Ferrer was a boy when he began singing professionally with Santiago groups in 1941. By the late 1950s, he was a well-known singer performing regularly with the bandleader Pacho Alonso.

He also made guest appearances with other legends, including Benny More and Orquesta de Chepin.

Alonso's group moved to Havana in 1959, and Mr. Ferrer came along, remaining with the group for more than two decades. By the early 1980s, Mr. Ferrer had left the musical scene, but came out of retirement to perform with the Buena Vista group.

Al McKibbin | 1919 ~ 2005

Innovative jazz bass player

Chicago-born musician performed with George Shearing, Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis and Thelonious Monk

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Al McKibbin, a Chicago-born bassist who brought a masterly fusion of jazz and Latin music to the George Shearing quintet and other groups in the 1940s and '50s, died.

Mr. McKibbin, 86, died of kidney failure July 29 in Good Samaritan Hospital in Los Angeles, said Gary Chen-Stein, a close friend.

One of the last great string bass players from the bebop era, he was little known publicly but was famous among musicians and had performed with the likes of Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis and Thelonious Monk, Chen-Stein said.

"He merged Afro-Cuban and black jazz. His bass line became

standard," Chen-Stein said. "His contribution in jazz is immeasurable. He's got fans all over the world."

Mr. McKibbin grew up in Detroit and began learning the bass at his brother's urging. He played local nightclubs while in high school and in 1943 was hired by bandleader Luck Milinder and moved to New York. There, he played with leading jazz figures such as saxophonist Coleman Hawkins.

He later appeared with Gillespie's big band, where he became interested in Latin music. Gillespie was experimenting with combining jazz and Afro-Cuban rhythms at the time.

"I began to feel that the Cubans were as close as you could come to African culture because they still practiced the roots of

our music," Mr. McKibbin wrote in the afterword to the 2002 book "Latin Jazz: The Perfect Combination."

He brought those sensibilities to his work with Shearing.

Mr. McKibbin moved to Los Angeles in 1958 and played in the staff orchestras of CBS and NBC, for movie soundtracks and on albums by Frank Sinatra, Randy Newman, Sammy Davis Jr. and others. He also played on Miles Davis' "The Complete Birth of the Cool" recordings.

He appeared on Monk's final recording in 1971 and toured with Monk and Gillespie as the Giants of Jazz that year and the next.

In 1989, he was part of the orchestra for the Broadway revue "Black and Blue."

Helen Phillips

Soprano broke color barrier at the Met

New York Times News Service

NEW YORK—Helen Phillips, a lyric-dramatic soprano who preceded Marian Anderson in breaking color barriers at the Metropolitan Opera and elsewhere in the 1940s and '50s, died July 27 in Manhattan. She was 86.

In 1947 Ms. Phillips became the first black singer known to have appeared with the Metropolitan Opera Chorus, in what she recalled as an apparently accidental breaking of an unofficial color barrier.

The stage manager at the opera had called her agent seeking the agent's best soprano because several chorus members

were missing; when Ms. Phillips arrived, she remembered, he looked at her twice, then told her to hurry up and go backstage.

"I just slipped in," she would tell friends. "Then after the performance, I slipped back out again."

Her groundbreaking status was confirmed by Jeff McMullan, an archivist at the Met, who said there had been no written policy barring blacks from performing there.

The first black chorister to be granted a contract was Elinor Harper, who made her debut at the opera in 1962.

Ms. Phillips was also the first African-American soloist with

Dr. E. Franko Goldman's Band, which played in Central Park in the 1940s and '50s.

After World War II, she made more than 500 concert appearances for the State Department in Austria and West Germany, then made her Town Hall debut in 1953.

She appeared as a soloist with symphonies in St. Louis and Madrid and the St. Louis Opera, and played Queenie in the 1954 production of "Show Boat" at City Center in New York.

Ms. Phillips, a native of St. Louis and a graduate of Lincoln University in Jefferson City, Mo., became a teacher and a vocal coach later in her career.