

Frankly, this situation stinks

By Esther Baird

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BEVERLY, MASS. - This afternoon I peppered my deck. You read correctly. And not just my deck, but some of the back behind the deck. Peppered by means of sprinkling cayenne pepper in strategic, non-child-accessible places.

What, you haven't seasoned your deck with cayenne pepper? Well then maybe you've filled small containers with ammonia-drenched towels and put them outside, because that's the other thing I did today.

Some of you will read this and nod your heads knowingly. You'll have guessed that here on Prospect Hill we find ourselves in a wild kingdom. Here where we live on essentially a zero lot. Here where I can look out my kitchen window and practically high-five my neighbor standing in hers. Here where we certainly don't have a yard by any measurable standard. Here we have — a skunk and a raccoon.

I realize that last year I wrote about my suspicion of skunks. I am suspicious no more. Now I merely gaze out my window most evenings around 6:30 p.m. to see Frank.

Frank likes to forage just a few feet from our deck.

But I digress. Predictable old Frank the Skunk is not the problem. Ralph is.

Ralph is a gigantic, persistent and completely unflappable raccoon. It's also fairly clear from the looks of things that Ralph is a she. Specifically, a nursing she. A slightly fed up, I -don't-care-what-sort-of-humans-live-here-I'm-finding-food-because-those-kits-are-driving-me-crazy sort of she raccoon. Ralph likes our back porch. She likes to take a tour of our table, grill, sliding board and recycling bin.

Sometimes for fun she'll climb sideways across our deck wall using her tail and claws to help her cling to the boards like an overgrown spider. Other times she'll hop up onto the fence next to our screen door and comes within feet of our faces as we peer out from the other side. She's not put off by us at all. In fact, her paw prints on the side of our house directly under our lowest window suggest that we are not the only ones doing some peering.

When our house and deck no longer interest her, she hops up onto our neighbor's garage and moseys over to their side where she treats them to the same unbothered, unhurried, leisurely investigation of their patio. She's sort of fun to watch and it's cute to imagine a den of fuzzy, baby raccoonettes — for about five minutes.

Then I remember that this is not Animal Planet and I'm not trying to make friends with the local fauna. And because what I *am* doing is trying to raise two young children, I called Animal Control. Turns out, they only deal with raccoons when they behave strangely or seem rabid. Ralph didn't qualify. She was curious and perhaps tenacious, like a typical mama raccoon.

I was told to keep an eye out for possible dens and to not let my girls play near it should we identify one. Got it. Before I hung up, the lady at Animal Control gave me a few additional tips on deterring Ralph including the aforementioned pepper and ammonia cocktail. Then she ended our chat saying, "Just remember if the raccoon starts to act crazy, certainly call us back. For example, my mother had a raccoon that climbed the drain pipe and then hissed and clawed at the window whenever she washed dishes — so you know that's a little unusual."

I'll say.

We decided to try and stink out Ralph with the ammonia and, I guess, spice her out with the pepper. I drew the line at coyote urine. That's right. Coyote urine.

"I hear it really keeps them away," said a lady at the pharmacy when I went to buy ammonia. I looked down at my daughters who were staring up at me from the stroller and whispered, "You mean I should purchase coyote pee and strew it about my deck!?"

The lady nodded like she was directing me to buy, say, light bulbs. "Yep, you should try it."

To which I say, "You first."

Last I checked the other, perhaps even more common, use for that multi-faceted coyote byproduct was to *lure* other coyotes into traps.

I think a skunk and a raccoon are sufficient. Adding a coyote to our outdoor menagerie might just feel, oh I don't know, busy. So we'll see.

I'm not optimistic. I have a feeling that Ralph prefers her leaves spicy, and thinks that ammonia keeps her whiskers fresh and clean. And really, in the end, who's the one acting strange and crazy around here anyway?

I'm guessing Ralph and Frank are voting for the pepper-sprinkling, ammonia-drenching human.

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