

ESSAY

The secret homes of wild creatures

BY KAY MACDONALD

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Sitting on my friend's porch one afternoon this summer, we were surrounded by the pots and beds of flowers she grows so well. A roof covers her porch and it was raining softly, but we were dry and comfortable and lazy. The iced tea was cold and good. Our dogs were napping peacefully.

In the center of her glass patio table, she had a white ceramic lamp decorated with small pink metal roses. As we talked, I watched little mud wasps hovering around the roses. When I looked more closely they were busy inside the metal blossoms and I could see that they were building mud homes not a foot from the place where people congregated to talk and laugh. They must have had enormous faith that we were benevolent by-standers and we truly were as a can of Raid was nearby and we just smiled at the industrious stinging builders.

It made me think of all the places in which we have seen little creatures take up residences. When we first moved here to the river, our house was, and still is, an old cottage, empty for several years and left to its own secrets. First we routed most of the bats from the attic and the mice and the chipmunks from their hiding holes. Still we heard scrabbling in the ceilings at night and then finally furry little tails began to stick out above the fireplace. It was a cruel game of the males who visited here in the evening and entertained themselves with whacking at the tails with a butcher knife.



Finally I saw our fugitive house guests and they were flying squirrels, the most appealing little animals with huge, wistful eyes in tiny, elfin faces and I put a stop to the tail chopping. But they remained in our ceiling, squeaking and scratching at night, until a fire in our fireplace wall sent them away to safer environs.

Mice have made happy homes in our underwear drawers, filling them with dog food carried from the downstairs utility closet. We are well acquainted with the pleasures of putting on fresh underthings full of dry dog food pellets. Bats have come and gone with only a little screaming. Robins make nests in our window boxes, one year with four babies, one of which was hulking and slow. I called him Baby Huey and put him back in his nest so many times that finally I made him a little shelter on the porch under the nest. His mother cared

for him there until he learned to fly long after his siblings had left home.

In one nest in the window box, the mother Robin was killed by a marauding Bluejay and the father dutifully finished raising the fledglings — he thought. They were still following him on foot around the yard when they were nearly as big as he was. When he began to court again, his patience wore thin with the lazy hangers on and he would fly at them in a rage, yelling, I'm pretty sure, "Get off your lazy tails, you kids. Get a job! Get a life!"

Once in a cabin my parents owned many years ago, a snake took up residence in the dish cupboard. I am more afraid of snakes than I am a lion so my screams were deafening when I reached for the bowl he liked to nap in. My mother calmly deposited him outdoors but he had returned to his bowl home every time we arrived for the weekend. Setting the table was a

hair-raising event for me that year.

Next to our house here on the river is a stretch of low, vacant land. Our dogs love to explore there and it is a sanctuary for bull-nosed snakes, garter snakes, chipmunks, skunks, racoons and basswood trees. I don't know how old basswoods live to be, but there has been the granddaddy of them all, a huge, lichen-covered, coarse-barked thing, right where we could watch it become a creature hotel.

Pilated woodpeckers made their home there, those giant comic book birds, and we have watched them hammer away at the tree, throwing out fist-sized chunks of wood. The black and grey squirrels hang out there and the noisy, angry red squirrels which have a quarrel with everything. Racoons raised their babies there every year, scrounging in our yard every night for the fruit we put out, climbing up on the porch once in awhile to peek in windows.

We had begun to think of the tree as a friendly wildlife host, but it began to show its age four or five years ago and this last two years has been a leafless snag. Still the animals made their homes there as in a derelict inner city hotel.

This spring though, in the heavy rains, a smaller basswood came down and we began to fear for the patriarch. I worried about the racoons and the woodpeckers and even the evil red squirrels. And, sure enough, last week we heard the ominous creaking and snapping on a windy evening. By the next morning the old tree leaned at a 45-degree angle, its bare old limbs hung up in a pine tree. We watched it all week. The animals seemed to have deserted their old home and the tree just waited for some final decision.

Then a torrential rain fell in the night and we heard the Basswood Hotel make its final fall. In the morning the spot where it had stood was empty and we walked out to look over the wreckage. Of course, the animals were gone and I am wondering now if they have found as safe a home again.

Spiders in our beds. Porcupines chewing on antlers in our garage. Racoons spying on us in the evening. Deer sleeping in a grassy bed behind the shed. We've watched so many of them and even shared our home with them. I hope this peaceful place along the river never disappears and takes with it the sanctuary they deserve.

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