

Critters coming indoors give homeowner the jitters

BY JANET HIBBARD
Special to the Record-Eagle

I've always lived in the city, sometimes in the big city and recently in a smaller town.

So when we first moved into an older house in downtown Traverse City, I didn't realize it came with resident bats. If they were there the winter we arrived, they didn't make themselves known.

As spring approached, I often noticed small flying "birds" later in the evening. They swooped and dove all around the yard. My boys would toss marshmallows into the air as the sky darkened and watch the bats dive at them. After watching them for a while, it suddenly occurred to me that the "birds" were actually bats — and coming from our house.

The large attic above the second story is only accessible through an opening in the ceiling of the upstairs hall. And I had no interest in going up there.

A neighbor girl who was studying the habits of bats asked if she could go up in our attic and gather some

bats.

I thought, "Sure, take all the bats you can carry."

She came down with a pillow case full of chattering creatures who definitely did not want to be removed from their home.

She would band them, take them out into the country and let them go. The object was to determine if they would come back to my house.

I didn't want them back. We tried putting rags soaked with ammonia in the attic. They didn't seem to mind. We tried leaving a light on day and night — someone told me wouldn't stay if there was constant light. They didn't seem to mind that, either.



Illustration by Pete Richard

I finally determined that since the bats were here before we moved in, it was possible that we could cohabit, as much as I hated the thought.

A couple of times, a stray bat would get in the downstairs by mistake. That was a

terrifying experience. I know all the good things about bats — how they eat insects and that it's all a myth about them flying into your hair. It's just that I don't want bats in my house. Finally, when we had our house sided a few years ago,

the bats moved on. Oh, they're still in the neighborhood, but just not in our attic anymore.

We have a hole cut in the mud room for a doggie door. There is a rubber flap that the dog is able to push aside in order to go in and out. It works out great, except for one thing that never occurred to me until it actually happened.

Relaxing on the couch one evening, drifting in and out of sleep while watching television, I heard a noise that I couldn't identify. It seemed like there was something in the kitchen and I got up and headed in that direction without thinking. As I rounded the corner into the dining room, I saw what it was. A raccoon was at our dog's dish, calmly eating its food and drinking its water.

I ran upstairs to get my husband, who was deep asleep. He and the "watch dog," who was on her back with all four legs in the air woke up as I tried to tell the story of the raccoon in the kitchen.

We came downstairs to the kitchen cautiously and sure enough, the raccoon was

still there. As we approached — my husband in the lead, me and the dog far behind — the raccoon noticed us and decided dinner time was over. He slowly turned and walked to the doggie door and left the house.

I never knew whether this was his first visit or our house was on his schedule. A board that fits in the doggie door was immediately fitted in the space and has been carefully positioned every night since.

I can live with squirrels, chipmunks and rabbits. I even think they're kind of cute if they don't destroy my flowers or eat my grapes or tomatoes. I draw the line when it comes to bats, raccoons and skunks. It seems to me they belong out in the countryside, along with deer and bears.

City living has its advantages. The convenience of living close to everything is more important to me than the sharing of nature with animals in the country.

Janet Hibbard is a local freelance writer.

Set your remodeling sights south — in the basement

BY BRENDA PROTZ
Copley News Service

Have your children moved back home? Do your grandchildren need more places to play? Do you not have enough space in your house?

If so, you are not alone. Today's family dynamics have changed — and with those changes many families find they need more space.

One popular solution is to finish a basement that may have only been extra storage space before.

Basements today have graduated from days of old when they were merely dark spaces where a water heater was contained. They are now extensions of the home and have many uses.

Ed Miller has been a residential remodeler for more than 17 years. He says there is much to consider before starting a job. After deciding if your basement is a dry one that won't cause health problems due to mold growth, you then need to decide who will do the job.

"You should get a reputable person to do the job. Get references through word of mouth and find out if the person is a remodeler or a builder," Miller said. "And find out who is actual-

ly going to be doing the job."

Miller stressed the latter because subcontracting work is a common practice. This isn't a bad thing to do, but it's important to know if this will occur on your job. If it is, find out if the contractor will be on the job every day.

One of the most important things, in his opinion, is very rarely addressed by the homeowner, said Miller.

"Most people never even ask if you are insured," he said. "They should ask for proof of insurance from the remodeler and anyone he is subcontracting out. If someone is working on your house and has an injury, the homeowner would be liable."

Some might disagree, but Miller also thinks that homeowners should try to do some of the remodeling themselves.

"It gives them a sense of accomplishment and more respect for the professionals," he said.

When Miller is hired for such work, he encourages homeowners to take on the simple parts of the job, like painting, to help keep costs down.

The most common uses for basement areas are a family

or recreation room, an office or bedroom space.

And whether you do the work yourself or hire a professional, building codes will have to be adhered to, a construction permit will need to be obtained and a building inspector will need to sign off on the completed work.

Realtor Marggie Zimmerman has been selling homes for more than 25 years and says finished basements generally help the resale value of the home, but says that homeowners need to keep a few things in mind.

"In smaller homes, finishing the basement will definitely help sell it. A lot just depends on the size of the home," she said.

Miller said a lot of the jobs he sees involves finishing part of the basement while still leaving an area unfinished for what he calls the "guy area," or the area where the furnace and water heater might go.

Zimmerman added some other things to consider

when determining the type of basement you want to do.

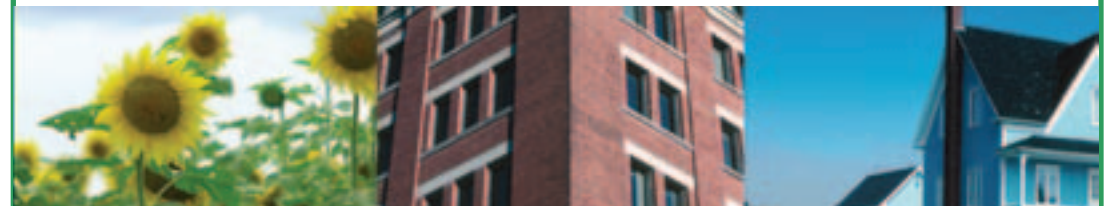
"You should keep it in line with the rest of the homes in the neighborhood. You don't want to do a cheap basement job in a higher-priced home and you

don't want to spend too much on a moderately priced home's basement," Zimmerman said.

Miller said when thinking of finishing a basement you should do it for the right reasons.

"Traditionally, if you put a dollar into your house, you won't get a dollar back," Miller said. "You should redo your basement for personal comfort or maintenance reasons, not just for resale."

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