

# Municipal World

CANADA'S MUNICIPAL MAGAZINE SINCE 1891

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***Please, can't we all  
just get along?***

*By encouraging  
Compassionate Conservation,  
municipalities can make it  
easier for humans and wild  
animals to live together*

Photo: Melanie Fontana

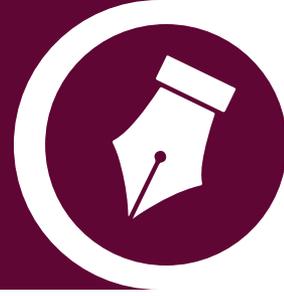
## **ALSO INSIDE**

**Going 100% RE in  
Oxford County**

**Canada's new rail  
grade crossings  
regulations**

**Engaging residents  
in local recycling**

**Safer practices  
for dry cleaning**



# EDITOR'S CORNER



**Susan M. Gardner**

“Those who wish to pet and baby wild animals ‘love’ them. But those who respect their natures and wish to let them live normal lives, love them more.”

from *Circle of the Seasons*  
by Edwin Way Teale

There are few things more exciting than catching a chance glimpse of a majestic, undisturbed wild bird or animal exploring its natural habitat, oblivious to our presence as we watch from a safe distance. And, who hasn't been charmed by the chatter of a frisky chipmunk skipping across the trail or dancing along the top of the fence. (A critter we've nicknamed "Chippy" is a frequent visitor in our backyard ... although, in the absence of any distinguishing marks, a friend recently suggested it's more likely to be 10 different critters, all just passing through.) Our attraction to the beauty of the natural world – and even the desire to experience the wild kingdom up close – is not surprising.

It is little wonder, then, that many can't resist the temptation to invite some of that wildlife into their backyards, hoping for the opportunity to observe it in closer proximity, and with greater frequency. Bird feeding alone has developed into a huge (and growing) consumer market. Market research in 2013 estimated the value of the Canadian market for wild bird feed and feeders at \$1.15 billion (USD) annually, with 61.5 percent of Canadian households indicating that they buy wild bird feed at least sometimes. In addition, the research found that almost 75 percent of those participating in bird feeding live in urban, suburban, or small town/village communities. Those pursuing bird feeding as a hobby are often quick-

ly rewarded for their efforts, discovering that, if you feed them, they will indeed come.

As Sara Dubois discusses in our cover story this month, however, feeding wildlife (even the birds), whether it is deliberate or unintentional, is seldom prudent. Aside from the negative impacts on the health and survival skills of the animals and birds we befriend, there are bound to be a variety of unintended consequences as well. These may include the attraction of other (perhaps unwanted) visitors such as rodents, raccoons, skunks, or even bears, as well as conflicts between neighbours.

For local governments – upon whose doorstep such issues will typically land – public education about Compassionate Conservation can go a long way toward reducing the incidence of human/wildlife conflict (as well as human/human conflict). So, as spring approaches, it can't hurt to remind residents about unintended consequences, and that one person's desire to experience "beautiful wildlife" in the backyard may also be a catalyst for scattered trash or an injured pet (or family member) for themselves or their neighbours. In addition, those with sincere intentions to help preserve wildlife (perhaps considering feeding as a tool) will be keen to learn that, for any of the birds or animals involved, the backyard feedings are not so much "helpful" as they are a human indulgence – with an impact that is frequently negative, and potentially dangerous, for all.

# Managing Wildlife Issues

*Compassionate Conservation practices can make it easier for humans and wild animals to live together*

What does compassion look like in your community? Providing a safe and healthy environment for all your residents to flourish is surely an essential component – but, what about your animal residents? While many municipalities have animal control by-laws meant to protect both people and pets, fewer communities have spread that consideration to their wild animal neighbours.

Recent media attention on urban deer, beaver-caused flooding, backyard bears, and dumpster raccoons has brought about tremendous controversy to local governments, who are generally under-resourced to deal with provincial wildlife issues. Yet, the wild neighbours who share our communities are just doing what is natural to them – seeking food and shelter. It is actually *human* practices that can make it harder – or easier – to live together.

## Principles of Compassionate Conservation

Here is where Compassionate Conservation can help guide policy and operational considerations for local governments. Compassionate Conservation is a scientific discipline that merges conservation values with animal welfare ethics and offers a framework that fully considers individual animals in research, policy, and practice.<sup>1</sup> Caring about local environments and wild animals together is a natural extension of providing safe communities, as many of the problems they face are the same – such as pollution and habitat loss.

The principles of Compassionate Conservation include:



- ▶ respecting wild animals for their inherent value, not just as a resource for people;
- ▶ recognizing the importance of individual animals within their population as they provide stability for groups;
- ▶ avoiding using labels such as “pest,” since the label reflects our attitude and not the animal’s quality; and



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<sup>1</sup> See <[spca.bc.ca/compassionateconservation](http://spca.bc.ca/compassionateconservation)>.



Photo: Sally Cornies

- understanding that co-existence is often a more effective management option.

The principles and actions that embody Compassionate Conservation will reduce individual wild animal harm and suffering, and will improve conservation outcomes.

So, what does this look like on the ground? As a start, basic wildlife by-laws and garbage management can help to frame the role of municipalities in Compassionate Conservation. For example, wildlife feeding is a frequent source of neighbour-to-neighbour complaints and nuisance wildlife interactions. Although most provinces will restrict the feeding of dangerous wildlife (bears, cougars, etc.) under provincial law for public safety reasons, most wildlife feeding (whether intentional or unintentional) is not prohibited unless by local by-law. Intentional feeding occurs when individuals purposely leave or hand out grain, seed, bread, nuts, etc. to attract animals. Unintentional feeding, which is much

more prevalent, happens when pet food, compost, unsecure gardens, or garbage is accessible to animals.

### Interaction with Wildlife

Encouraging positive interactions with wildlife in our communities is essential and many people enjoy seeing wildlife close to them. But, some believe feeding is a harmless activity. Unfortunately, any type of unnatural feeding can have significant negative consequences for the health and behaviour of wildlife – it does much more harm than good. Feeding wild animals unnatural foods can cause nutritional deficiencies, spread disease in populations, increase aggression of animals or their dependency on human foods, negatively affect future breeding, and encourage the presence of their larger predators and animals such as rodents. When accessible to wild animals, attractants such as garbage and compost also have the potential to injure animals by entangling them in plastic bags and containers.

What about the birds? The best way to enjoy birds in our backyards has always been to grow native plants that they naturally are attracted to. But, for those adamant that they have to feed birds, only winter (harsh weather) feeding of natural foods – in feeders not accessible to squirrels, raccoons, rodents, deer, or bears – should be permitted. Remember, we feed birds not because they need it, but because we want to share our backyards with them. Feeding by-laws go hand-in-hand with municipal garbage management. Wildlife-proof bins for municipal pick-up are key to preventing increased nuisance wildlife activity and the messy clean-up of tipped over bins. Day-of-pick-up restrictions for putting out bins is also important. In communities with landfills, proper fencing and bird deterrents are critical to preventing the food-conditioning of local wildlife.

Further, if we learn how to keep both our pets and wildlife safe and healthy by fostering humane communities of responsible pet guardians, we can have happy

pets and keep nature in balance. In North America, domestic cats kill hundreds of millions of wild birds and mammals each year. Collar bells do not prevent cats from catching and killing prey, and most birds that are caught by a cat will not survive. Domestic dogs can also seriously injure many wild species, including squirrels, seal pups, and deer fawns. Cat and dog owners should both be discouraged from allowing animals to roam unsupervised. Outdoor enclosures or leashes are safe options for those cats that have a strong desire for outdoor access. Dog owners should respect leash regulations in any parks and keep their dogs leashed in areas where they may encounter wildlife.

### Preventing and Mitigating Wildlife Conflicts

Prevention should always be a first step to mitigating wildlife conflicts. But, when the human-wildlife conflict is already in full swing, effective and humane solutions are required to reach sustainable solutions that are also socially acceptable, and that meet broad public

values for the treatment of wildlife. This does not mean that all conflicts have to be dealt with non-lethally – in fact, some non-lethal practices (e.g., long-distance relocation) are inhumane for certain animals because they can be separated from young or social groups, or released into unfamiliar territories without any food caches and novel predators. However, it is important to note that many lethal solutions are not *proven* solutions and are often ineffective at reaching objectives (since more animals just move in to replace those removed), and the methods themselves are often inhumane.

Compassionate Conservation of local wildlife equates to ensuring that ethical wildlife control practices are implemented. Step 1 is to ask whether any control is necessary; and, if no intervention was done, what would happen? If non-intervention is unacceptable because the risk to public health and safety or damage is too high, then setting clear and achievable objectives by defining the *actual* problem (not the potential or perceived problem) is Step 2: Is the problem

damage to property or crops? Is there an increased risk of vehicle collisions? Defining any wildlife conflict as “*there are just too many of them*” is not helpful, as most animal populations are generally not accurately measured and it is not possible to remove every last animal – practically or ethically. Step 3 is to look at all options on the table: what are the costs (not just monetary), benefits, and animal welfare considerations – and who are community partners that can help? Finally, an assessment of the ability to monitor the intervention actions and perform long-term maintenance of the program is essential to ensuring conflict does not arise (at least significantly) again.

Developing a Compassionate Conservation strategy for your municipality by identifying current and potential future conflicts, gauging available community resources and expertise on wildlife, and implementing effective and ethical solutions is a bold leadership commitment that you can make to provide a safe and healthy environment for all your residents – both human and animal. [MW](#)

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