

Understanding Your Fall Visitors by Steven Grayson



Photo caption: A late night visitor chomping on a recent grasshopper invasion.

Photo credit: Steven Grayson

As autumn gives us shorter days and cooler nights, we often start seeing some creatures we either don't notice, or that we ignore the rest of the year. I'm speaking here of skunks, racoons, and spiders.

These three can be unnerving based on whatever criteria sets your pulse to race: they can move quickly for their size, they could possibly do you some harm, and at least one of them can make the dog smell like it should never be in the house again.

Let's talk about skunks first. Besides the decidedly strong odor they can spray, skunks are associated in some people's mind with rabies. Though skunks can be reservoirs of the rabies virus, in Arizona, bats are a more likely source of rabies according to the Center for Disease Control (CDC). Though it was a scourge in the 1960s when domestic dogs were also a viral reservoir, the chance of contracting rabies and dying is less than getting struck by lightning. That said, do not get close to a skunk, and if you see the usually nocturnal animal during daytime or if it is acting aggressively, definitely call animal control. If you are scratched or bitten, clean the wound and get medical help immediately. Skunks have excellent hearing and a good sense of smell, but they cannot see further than about 10 feet in front of them, so make noise and they should move quickly away from you.

I recently had an interaction with skunks that turned out quite well. In June, my garden was overrun with grasshoppers. They skeletonized the eggplant starts, ate the spinach plants down

to the ground, and crippled most of the peppers. A cloud of them would spray up when I ran my hand over the green tops of the carrots. One evening, later in the month, my wildlife camera caught two skunks moving through the yard. More candid skunk photos followed in the next two weeks, and after that, the grasshopper infestation was over. Skunks are omnivores and will eat both plants and small animals, but they love to eat grasshoppers. About 70% of a skunk's diet are insects. They left the garden plants alone.

Racoons, another nocturnal visitor, are visible this time of year as they try to eat as much as they can so they can survive through the winter months. Racoons and skunks both enter a state called torpor during the winter, where their metabolic rate decreases significantly, leading to a state of dormancy to conserve energy. So, racoons are going to eat---since they are omnivores, they will eat anything including fruits, vegetables, nuts, insects, small mammals, and birds---then disappear into a burrow until spring. To help keep racoons on a proper diet, keep a tight lid on your garbage cans and for heaven sakes don't leave pet food out at night. Racoons can also carry rabies and are another animal to give a wide berth to.

Along with bats, pumpkins, and black cats, spiders are a familiar icon for Halloween decorations. While it may seem that spiders have suddenly appeared running across your floors, they have probably been around your house for most of the year. There's a lot to talk about when on the subject of spiders, but for this column let's just say that if you are seeing them more often this time of year that they are either focused on mating or migrating.

Arizona has about 27 species of spiders, ranging from the consistently misidentified "daddy long legs" which covers several different species up to the several varieties of tarantulas. There are also several species of orb spiders that build the intriguing wheel-shaped webs and the female is probably waiting along the strands for a male to vibrate one with his presence. Wolf spiders are commonly seen as they are of a significant size and they tend to run across our floors pursuing a potential mate.

At this time of year, forgive the activities of those creatures making plans for the coming winter. Even as we harvest the bounty of our gardens and hope for that one last pumpkin to turn orange, give thanks for all the food and all the creatures that still choose to share the world with us.

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