



Urban Wildlife Issues
Wildlife Rescue column by Nicky Fried
as appearing in the *Burnaby NOW*

Burnaby Rhododendron and Gardens Society Help Wildlife

It's not often that I get to use big medical words in this column. Today is one of those days. In fact I get to use three important sounding medical words; words that have a great deal of significance for patients of the Wildlife Rescue Association (WRA).

The three words, I've bolded them just in case anyone misses them, are: **refractometer**, and **pediatric stethoscope**. You're reading these words courtesy of the Burnaby Rhododendron and Gardens Society. The society has donated funds to WRA toward the purchase of a portable refractometer and a pediatric stethoscope, as well as \$500 in cash.

The pediatric stethoscope will be used to diagnose respiratory and cardiological difficulties in small patients, the refractometer for blood analysis. In our case the refractometer will measure the total proteins in a patient's blood serum, an indicator of the patient's level of health or emaciation. The science behind the refractometer is fascinating and has to do with light bending and the refractive index, which is the measure of how far light is bent by different materials. But that is a story in itself.

Wild birds and mammals are an important part of any urban garden and we are thrilled to have the support of the Burnaby Rhododendron and Gardens Society in protecting our local wildlife.

By the way there was wildlife in my own garden this week. It's usually my out-of-town guests who get to see our glorious wildlife, and this instance was no exception.

It was the neighbourhood skunk who provided the visual entertainment, which fortunately did not extend to the olfactory. Karen, our 20-something cousin was the first to spot our visitor and she reminded us that the last time she had been in our home several years ago, same skunk was in evidence. We are skeptical about sameness of the skunk, but we have to acknowledge that no skunks have been spotted in our yard since last she visited. The family is seriously considering the connection.

I didn't get a good look at our local skunk but suspect it might be a Striped Skunk, which is the most common to the Lower Mainland. The reason for increased mammal sightings at this time of year is largely due to youngsters striking out on their own. Young mammals (born in the spring of 2005) have to learn to forage for themselves and establish their own territories.

Had it been the smaller and rarer Spotted Skunk, it would have been obvious for a different reason. Spotted skunks mate at this time of year. However they often delay implantation - meaning that after mating the fertilized egg can be held dormant for many weeks before they are implanted in the uterine wall and development continued. Mating of the Western Spotted Skunk often occurs in September or October with implantation delayed until March. Mating of other species of skunk usually occurs in late winter or early spring. Gestation time varies, but averages around sixty to seventy-five days.

According to WRA records a number of young skunks have been in need of care this fall. The most recent, however, was an adult male. He was quite a large fellow weighing in at seven kilograms. The upper end of the scale for males is around 6.6 kilograms. His injuries suggest he was wounded during a fight. Treating him was a tricky business given the skunk's defense mechanism. However we humans do learn from our mistakes, and care givers at WRA know to approach the skunk stealthily and grab the rear end with a view to holding down the tail to keep spraying in check. This offers protection for a limited time, but is not much help once you release the critter. We are happy to report that our big fellow was successfully released early in October. Nope, not the one that was in my yard.

Thankfully my nocturnal visitor has also moved on. If you are having trouble with a persistent mammal visitor, go and check the garbage. If it's secure mammals are less likely to set up home on your property. Cover up those welcoming holes and make sure you don't have any trees leaning against your house. If they have already made dens in your home try installing a battery-operated radio and a trouble light. This will upset the nocturnal creatures and they will likely move out. A large ice-cream tub with holes in the lid and two inches of bleach and a rag inside will also do the trick.