

Controlling the Unwanted Critters

When you live on the edge of open space it's impossible not to share your landscape with rabbits, deer, prairie dogs, pocket gophers, rock squirrels, skunks, mice, and nuisance birds. In most cases, the wildlife was here before we were and we encroached on their space.

Just like weeds, the first step for controlling a critter is identification. Visual ID is nice, but especially for underground critters that go out at night, you may be faced with IDing the critter by other methods. Look for signs like the way vegetation is cut, the shape and location of a mound of dirt, or the scat color, size and shape.

- Chewed off or eaten new green vegetation (clean cuts); favorites are turf and your best plants; small pellet scat often nearby – rabbits
- Chewed off new vegetation (ragged tears), often around four feet high, rubbed trees, hoof prints – deer
- Clipped cut vegetation around a dome-shaped mound, may have nose prints around hole; colony of mounds. Critter is often seen above ground. – prairie dogs
- Fan-shaped soil mounds, plugged tunnels, wilting or disappearing plants (dragged into tunnel) – either pocket gopher or rock squirrel. Rock squirrels live in colonies.
- Cone-shaped holes under porches, houses, or raised foundations – skunks
- Chewed damage to irrigation, wiring, rags, trees or shrubs (sharp cuts). One to two inch wide runways. Small pellet scat. - mice
- White poop on walls, roof, sidewalks - birds

There are two ways to control critters: modifying the habitat or controlling the population.

1. Modifying the habitat includes removing pet food, adding fencing or other barriers (e.g. inserting steel wool into drainage outlets), installing plant cages (e.g. hanging plant wire holders turned upside down), removing excess bird seed, planting an offensive plant nearby, removing garbage and debris, or removing other potential hiding spots. Sometimes modifying the habitat is the only step you need to take to make the critter go elsewhere.
2. Population control includes trapping (non-lethal and lethal), repelling the critter, fumigants (gassing), or using toxic baits **.

When modifying the habitat doesn't work, you need to decide how lethal to be. Transporting a trapped animal to another location was once thought to be more humane, but studies have shown this is a slow death.

The table below includes the most effective method of control listed first.

Rabbits	Non-lethal traps. When plant is young, use cages to protect. Fencing.
Deer	7' high fence.
Prairie dogs	Lethal trap placed at burrow entrance.
Pocket gophers	Lethal trap with trap specifically for pocket gophers. Plant garlic among your favorite plants.
Rock squirrels	Live trapping. Rodenticide bait or fumigation in spring**.
Skunks	Baited, covered box traps. Removing mice and cleaning debris first may be easier.

Mice	Common mouse trap placed with the trigger end next to but perpendicular to wall.
Nuisance Birds	Bird spikes - clear plastic or thin wire strips. Screens or guards over chimney. Remove food sources.

** Toxic baits should be used cautiously because it's so easy to kill a pet or other unintended target. Fumigants should never be used near a house.

Personally, to control rabbits we use a live trap baited with a sweet apple and take any captured rabbit a short distance away. For mice, we bait a standard mouse trap with peanut butter, spray the dead mouse with Lysol, remove it from the trap (using disposable plastic gloves), put it into a plastic bag and then into the trash. We had so many mourning doves that we removed our bird feeder. We have lots of plants for food, nectar, and nesting material in the landscape so we still see lots of birds. While the robins deposit purple poop on the walls, they sit on top of the grape trellis, watch for and catch tomato hornworms so we don't try to control the robins. The other critters we haven't had (yet). My friend who lives in Corrales used the wire cages and planted the garlic to save her daylilies from destruction. She says the garlic is working well.

For additional information on each critter use the NMSU publications found at

http://aces.nmsu.edu/pubs/_l/ .

Book Source for this article was *Down to Earth: A Gardener's Guide to the Albuquerque Area from local Master Gardeners*.