

# Growing Population Of Mainland Creatures Upsets North End Town

*Trapper Nabs Nine Raccoons*

Recently Barnegat Light borough has been addressing problems surrounding a group of raccoons. During the Aug. 16 borough council meeting, Mayor Kirk O. Larson told council and residents some of the raccoons in town reportedly had grown aggressive. In one instance, adolescent raccoons had harassed a man and his dog as they walked through the neighborhood at the north end of town. In another, a woman said she had been chased from her porch into the house by the animals.

In response, the town called in Balance of Nature, a Tuckerton-based business that deals with wildlife control as well as termite and pest control. Owner Jerry Malangone said later he trapped nine raccoons at the root of the recent problems, and then relocated them off the Island to places where they would have room to live, yet wouldn't interfere with the public.

"We haven't caught one" since the initial trapping of the first group of raccoons two weeks ago, Larson said. "We thought we got them all."

Last Monday, however, Larson said the town was still receiving reports of marauding raccoons. Malangone was preparing to return to the borough on Tuesday to trap more of the animals, he said.

Larson suspected the meeting announcement had prompted other residents to report their own problems. He said the raccoon population stays primarily at the northern end of town and seems to emerge at night, traveling in gangs and getting into garbage cans.

Malangone blamed the large number of raccoons living and foraging together for creating such a big problem in the borough, and added the town's number of summer visitors makes it easier for the animals to find food in town. He listed food particles left on barbecue grills, unclean coolers and garbage cans on the beaches as major food sources for the animals. He attributes their aggressiveness to the raccoon's bold nature, especially when there are many in such a small area.

## 'Coons Among Area's Indigenous Creatures

"Squirrels, raccoons and red fox have been on the Island for generations," said Michael Melchionne, chief animal control officer in Stafford Township. Melchionne and his department work with the Island municipalities of Barnegat Light, Harvey Cedars, Long Beach Township and Beach Haven.

"Every year we get six to a dozen litters of baby raccoons on Long Beach Island. We get calls for them — most of the time they're in the attics," he said.

"I've encountered them like bobcats," said Malangone, adding such aggressive behavior is generally seen in mothers caring for babies in the

spring, usually in April and May.

Melchionne said in any instance of animal aggression, incidents should be reported immediately.

"We have the right to trap raccoons and relocate them. They can call us 24 hours a day," Melchionne said of animal control services offered to the municipalities he oversees.

"What people don't understand is that in general, wildlife is docile to humans. The only time when they become aggressors is that somewhere in life, the animals came into contact with humans or dogs and identified one or the other as a potential enemy or prey.

"Unless they've had a bad experience, they don't bother with anyone," Melchionne said.

As with any form of wildlife, their goal is to survive.

"Unless an animal's had any kind of confrontation, it doesn't have a clue that humans or cars pose a threat," he said.

Melchionne shared what's arguably the most basic principal when dealing with wild animals.

"Never approach a wild animal," he said. "They will bite you if you try and grab them. We always recommend people don't handle, touch, feed or even encourage wildlife."

Unless the intent of people is to share their home, their attic, a crawl space or a soffit with local wildlife, it's a good idea not to feed them. Melchionne made clear the difference between enjoying wildlife and creating a bad relationship. Although it's difficult to resist luring a cute baby squirrel closer to home by tossing a few peanuts its way, think again.

"This will encourage the animal to seek shelter closer to the food source," Melchionne said.

Another major mistake is feeding pets, such as dogs and cats, outdoors. This encourages wild animals to come and feed. When domestic and wild animals are commingling for food, conditions are ideal for the spread of disease, such as rabies.

"People are seven times more likely to contract rabies from a domestic cat than they are from a raccoon," he said, offering an offbeat yet true statistic. "There's a simple reason behind that. People are more likely to approach a sick cat to give it aid; they're not expecting rabies or the rabies virus. But they're not likely to approach a sick raccoon."

## Myths and Misbeliefs

Melchionne said it's a myth that animals such as raccoons, squirrels, rabbits, chipmunks and mice are responsible for the spread of rabies. They are from a class of animals called lagomorphs, which means a rodent or animal that gnaws. Overall, this group of animals has the lowest incidence of rabies.

"The things you grew up hearing aren't necessarily true. The truth is



Jerry Malangone

**JUVENILE DELINQUENTS:** Two young raccoons were among the nine initially trapped in Barnegat Light. Residents are complaining about a growing population of aggressive raccoons invading town properties.

the same stories keep getting passed from generation to generation," he said.

This isn't the only misconception. "I get calls from people to tell me they have a raccoon, an otter or a coyote in their yard," he said. "I tell them, that's great, get your camera out and enjoy it. I wish I had that animal come into my yard."

Many of these animals made this region home years ago, Melchionne said. Often the reason behind their movement, or increased sightings, is the increasing development that displaces them from a more secluded habitat.

"These animals have been around, but we've encroached on them. Our homes have become their homes. Because they want to survive, they've adapted to our ways — they're living in attics, sheds and even our boats in the back yard," he said.

He recalled a call from a frantic boater on a sedge island in the middle of Barnegat Bay. The boater apparently had discovered a raccoon onboard and, fearing an attack, said he wasn't getting back on the boat until the animal was removed.

"Raccoons are indigenous to the Island; they've never left. At one time the population might have been lower, but it's been a pretty stable population," Melchionne said.

He said it's not unreasonable for any of these wild animals to establish populations even in towns where it's sparsely wooded and heaped up with two- and three-story homes surrounded by brick pavers.

"It doesn't take much support for a local population of squirrels, raccoons and possums: a couple of bushes and a tree to support a suitable habitat, a food source, a nest or a den and an animal of the opposite sex," he said.

Year after year, the wild population grows, and each brood of young branches off and develops its own territory.

"There's not that family bond like you find with people. They're survivalists; they'll chase their young away. They'll continue to branch out until there's no place to go," Melchionne said.

Humans can endanger animals in

more direct ways than building. He recalled an incident in the High Bar Harbor section of Long Beach Township where an animal in its own habitat died as a result of man's curiosity.

"I got a call from a gentleman holding onto a red fox," Melchionne said.

It seems the man, a college student enjoying a summer party, was one of a group of people who had slowly coaxed an adolescent red fox toward them with hot dogs. The young fox, unaware that humans are dangerous, crept closer and closer.

"One college fellow decided he was going to jump on the red fox," Melchionne said. The man succeeded in plying the fox with hot dogs until it was close enough for him to grab

it.

The fox did what any wild animal would do — it bit him. Melchionne said the college kids called the police for advice and were told to hold onto the fox until animal control could get there. Without the animal, the man would have had to undergo a painful series of rabies shots. So there he sat, clutching the struggling fox for the better part of an hour.

Sadly, in the end the fox had to be euthanized so it could be sent to Trenton for the appropriate rabies test, which cannot be done on a live animal.

"What seemed like a prank resulted in the death of a perfectly healthy animal," Melchionne said. "It

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## BeachBriefs

### 'Rising from the Storm' Benefit Planned Sept. 10

An Elvis tribute band and another group specializing in an assortment of musical styles take the stage in the Ocean County Library's main branch in Toms River for a "Rising from the Storm" benefit concert Sunday, Sept. 10, beginning at 1:30 p.m.

Suggested donation is \$20, which can be paid in cash or check. Proceeds benefit the rebuilding efforts of the Hancock County Library system, which was nearly destroyed when Hurricane Katrina ravaged Mississippi's Gulf Coast last year.

Ocean County Library spokesman Larry Meegan said two of the four Hancock branches "were completely gone."

"The other two branch buildings were severely damaged and they are only partially operating," said Meegan. "They're a long way from getting back on track. The library system is not looking for book donations. They mostly want to collect money and use it for the costs of rebuilding and buying equipment."

Meegan said Ocean County "adopted" the Hancock system because of similarities in the two systems.

"We both serve coastal communities and deal with seasonal populations," he said.

Concert performers are the Roustabouts and James Day and the Fish Fry. The Roustabouts feature Elvis tunes from the movies, such as "Jailhouse Rock," "Fun in Acapulco," "Love Me Tender," "G.I. Blues," "Blue Hawaii" and "King Creole." Taking its name from an Elvis movie, the band's sets can also include hits by Little Richard, Bobby Darin, Ray Charles and the Stray Cats.

James Day and the Fish Fry have a repertoire including West Coast jump blues, Chicago and New Orleans blues, swing, jazz, Latin American styles and zydeco.

A silent auction will take place during the concert, featuring gift baskets and other items donated by area merchants and individuals. Representatives of the Hancock Library will be on hand to discuss the devastation, aftermath and rebuilding efforts.

For more information, call the Ocean County Library at 732-349-6200, extension 5400. — E.E.