

Kinnickinnic Critters

Your Wild Neighbors

By Tom Andersen

Ever wonder what wanders through your property while you're tucked in at night? Residents who have lived in the country all their lives might not be surprised to know that there are a good number of wild animals that inhabit the woodlots in Kinnickinnic Township. However, newer residents coming from an urban environment might be. Besides the obligatory squirrels, rabbits, and raccoons, we do have some very interesting animals living amongst us.

Black bears, while not common in the Township, are present. They are not much fun to have as a nighttime visitor if you have bird feeders out or perhaps a compost pile with food scraps in it. You may have an unwelcome surprise when you get up in the morning. Sunflowers seeds and suet are pretty much an irresistible attraction for bears as are compost bins with food scraps. In the spring after a long winter's hibernation there is not a great deal of food available for them. This is the time when they will most likely visit your backyard looking for an easy meal. The easiest thing to do to avoid a problem is to take the food source away. Bring your feeders in at night.



Photo - TA

At our household we have been the recipients of visits by bears on numerous occasions. Sometimes we catch them in the act of raiding the bird feeders because our dog will let us know if we have an

unwanted visitor. A big spoon on the back of a frying pan and a little "banging" will most likely send the bear on its way. On other occasions we have not been so lucky. Forgetting to take feeders in at night when a bear is around could very likely end up with this result.



Photo – TA

Whitetail Deer are extremely common in our Township. So common, in fact, that it is not unusual to see them every day. They are very adaptable and coexist quite nicely with us. For the most part, they are good neighbors. They can, however, be a problem. Sometimes farmers in the Township can have crop yields substantially reduced by hungry deer. Landowners with unprotected gardens are almost certainly going to attract deer. It is also not uncommon for whitetails to munch on landscape plantings. While feeding deer is a common practice, you might be drawing unwanted attention to vegetation you do not want eaten.



Photo – TA

Where hunting is allowed in the Township, deer are routinely harvested. That said, many wily, very large bucks find it relatively easy to evade hunters as there is much land where they can find safety from hunters. Hence, we do have a bumper crop of whitetails in Kinnickinnic Township.

The aforementioned Bears prey on Whitetail fawns. Fawns are a favored prey of bears but the number of bears in the Township is limited.



A newly minted Whitetail and a prime target for Bears & Coyotes
Photo – TA

Coyotes, however, are very numerous here and they do prey on fawns. If you haven't heard Coyotes howling and yipping at night, then likely you haven't been listening. Coyotes are extremely resourceful and they get along with humans quite nicely. While plentiful in our Township most people will never see one.



Adult Coyote trotting down my trail in the woods Photo – TA

Coyotes are, in a word, abundant almost everywhere in the United States. I've seen them in downtown Chicago. I've even seen one on a curb

on a busy street in Phoenix waiting for traffic to subside to cross the road. He crossed successfully once cars stopped, and yes, he used the crosswalk. They are smart critters!

Coyotes are very opportunistic feeders. Small mammals and rodents are likely a large part of their diet. They might weigh in at anywhere from 25 to 35 pounds but can get larger.

The Red Fox is another critter that keeps rodent numbers in check. Seeing a mother fox carrying 6 mice in her mouth on the way to feed her young suggests they are masters at catching mice. When Coyotes and Red Foxes compete for the same food sources, the Coyote usually wins. In my experience high numbers of Coyotes in an area means fewer foxes.



Alert Red Fox Vixen and one of her five pups below. Photo - TA



A Red Fox Kit Photo – TA

Another fox found in Kinnickinnic Township is the Gray Fox. They are smaller than a Red Fox weighing in around 8 to 10 lbs. while Red's might go to 15 lbs. Gray's are quite nocturnal and the

most unusual thing about the Gray Fox is that they climb trees! I once observed one chasing a Red Squirrel up a small maple tree. He wasn't successful once the squirrel reached the smaller limbs. While small rodents make up a good part of their diet, it is not uncommon for Grays to come looking for sunflower seeds under a birdfeeder. They'll also dine on any available berries in season. If you need an efficient mouse removal critter, then the Red Fox or Gray Fox is your friend.



Gray Fox poking around under the bird feeder eating sunflower seeds. Photo – TA



Beautiful Adult Gray Photo – TA

There is a very unusual animal about that likely very few residents have ever seen or heard of for that matter. It is the Fisher. They are members of the mustelid family (think mink, martens, wolverines). Once common in Wisconsin, the Fisher was basically extirpated from this state. During the 1920's and 30's a trapper might get as

much a \$100 for a Fisher pelt (a lot of money in those days). Trapping Fishers is relatively easy and that combined with changing habitat from logging caused a significant crash in Fisher numbers in the State. Restoration efforts, however, have clearly been successful. They are now found across much of Wisconsin. Fishers typically weigh about 10 lbs. with females being smaller. If you see a Fisher in the wild, you'll never forget their unusual (sort of sideways) gait. They're fun to watch. They seem to be in constant motion. I've been fortunate to see them on numerous occasions while sitting in a deer stand.

I first noted that Fishers were present in the area about 10 years ago when I found their tracks in the snow. Winter it is a great time to see who has been about on your land by observing animal tracks in the snow.



Fisher tracks in the snow. Photo - TA



A large Fisher caught on remote camera Photo – TA

The Fisher is a pretty efficient predator continually on the hunt for various small mammals. Feral cats can be prey for Fishers. For the most

part they are nocturnal although I do see them hunting during daylight hours too. If you have a house cat that roams at large a Fisher will likely find it. On two separate occasions I have seen Fishers carrying a presumably feral cat in their mouth. Fishers are as at home in the trees as on the ground. Interestingly they are one of the few predators that successfully preys upon porcupines (that can't be fun).

One funny little animal that I have failed to capture in a picture is the Opossum. They actually do play "possum" if threatened. Basically, the response if threatened is fainting. They simply roll over and look like they are dead. When they do that their mouth falls open displaying a lot of teeth which may explain why they are sometimes referred to as "grinners". Their anal glands secrete a foul smell when they do this which I suspect might deter a hungry Coyote or Fisher. Only on one occasion was I able to photograph one. It was foraging below our birdfeeder one warm winter day. Poor thing. It's feet were frozen and bloody and it did the "Possum thing". It looked so pathetic I didn't photograph it.

It seems that these days they are quite common throughout the northern 2/3 of Wisconsin. They are normally nocturnal but occasionally can be seen in the daytime. Watch your birdfeeder at night as they will likely show up if seeds are scattered on the ground. Leaving dog food outside in the dog dish will guarantee a visit.

Getting along with our wild neighbors is generally not too difficult. We've lived in a heavily wooded property in the Township for nearly 25 years and by being mindful of the behavior of our animal neighbors, we have encountered very few problems. We enjoy sharing the neighborhood with them.

Tom Andersen is the Editor of *The Current*. All the photographs are from Kinnickinnic Township with the exception of the Black Bear.