



Why They Interrupt Us

It started with a terrific banging at the front door. “What are you doing?” I hollered at my husband. He was hollering pretty much the same thing. I was in the kitchen; he was at the other end of the house in the bedroom. We met at the front entrance.

Two swans were thumping against the glass door. What they were doing — well, there’s no way to put this delicately. We were face to face with the most elemental aspect of the natural world. They were having sex against the glass.

Their enthusiasm was such that my husband feared for the door and started after them with a hose. But one of the swans started for him. He

wasn’t sure of its intentions. He

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couldn’t tell if it was angry or amorous. I don’t know how much you know about swans but they are not what you would call gentle creatures. Mute swans such as the ones that frequent the pond at the rear of our property are the heaviest of all flying birds and can weigh more

than 40 pounds. They have been known to batter dogs to death with their wings, which can spread as much as 6 feet. The swan raised its shoulders and hissed — a definite sign of displeasure — and my braveheart husband fled back into the garage.

We were cleaning feathers off the front walk for weeks.

I didn’t mind. It was spring, when the world wakens. In their own way, the feathers were as much a sign of life as birdsong announcing the new day and snapping turtles laying eggs on freshly turned earth. But in my

heart I knew the feathers represented something more. They signaled the clash between suburbia and the natural world — a push and pull of confrontation and adaptation that becomes more pronounced as we keep strip-malling and subdividing what little remains of our open space.

The day of the swans didn’t constitute my first run-in with the natural world. Such confrontations creep and crawl and leap and fly through my life — I dealt with cockroaches in a Manhattan walk-up and mice in a basement apartment in Boston. And I lived for a few years in Austin, Texas, where armadillos ambled across the front porch and lizards climbed the walls.

But it wasn’t until I came to Long Island that I truly found nature at my door — and not always as a welcome guest. I’m not just talking swans in love or raccoons in the garbage can or ants in the kitchen. I had barely settled into my first single-in-Suffolk apartment when a squirrel apparently dropped in through the fireplace. I say apparently because I was fast asleep. All I know is that I woke up screaming when the thing jumped on my bed. We were eye to beady eye until I yelled for my landlords, who lived upstairs. They trapped it in the rug and released it outside.

Now I’m a married woman with a home on Suffolk’s North Shore. A large pond flows along the edge of our backyard, which explains the swans and the snapping turtles and why we’re a testament to what happens when suburbia intrudes on the natural world — and vice versa.

Don’t mistake my intentions. I love where I live. Every now and then an osprey fishes in the pond, muskrats sunbathe along the bank and one clear and quiet day, an immature bald eagle surveyed the world from a perch in the backyard. Its head feathers had yet to turn white but otherwise, it was everything an eagle is supposed to be — imperious, proud, vigilant and wild. One summer, red foxes loped down the driveway and the next season, their absence was accentuated by the sight of ring-necked pheasants strutting along the front lawn.

I am simply pointing out that all is not sweetness and light on the frontier. And that encounters with the natural world are not always moments of delight. Snapping turtles, for instance. It’s grand to watch the female of the species lay her eggs just beyond your patio and then cover up the hole — we tried to help by putting



chicken wire over it to discourage hungry raccoons. But it’s quite another thing when you have to risk a rupture netting a snapping turtle the size of a truck tire in the swimming pool and toting it back to the pond.

And Canada geese are splendid aloft and on the water but they’re a scourge on land — especially when they turn

the driveway into a gauntlet and even more so when your husband tracks their leavings onto the brand new carpet.

The same goes for swans. I thrill to the sound of swans flying low, their wings slapping against the water, but don’t be fooled by the big PR buildup. Believe me, it’s not all Saint-Saens and Swan Lake and the Ugly Duckling.





Whether it's swans at the door, squirrels in the chimney or rats in the garage, such uninvited guests epitomize suburbia's intrusion on nature, a clash escalating with overdevelopment.



Illustrations by Janet Hamlin

The fracas at the front door may have been our most dramatic encounter, but it wasn't the only one.

We've shooed swans out of the swimming pool with hoses and brooms and tried to stop a pair of them from trampling plants all over the backyard. Old braveheart chased after them in full voice — shouting is one of his talents — and even

threw twigs and pebbles. One swan finally returned to the pond. The other stood on the bank and stared at my husband as if to say, "come a step closer and I'll knock you on your whatever." Luckily, we had a young couple from Ireland staying with us. The Irish have their own magic — look what Saint Patrick did with the snakes. Anyway, the young

man simply stared at the swan and said calmly, "Go!" Just like that, the swan turned and jumped in the water.

"What did you do, Andrew?" I asked.

Andrew smiled. "Sure, and it knew I was from Belfast."

I can laugh at most of these encounters or at least laugh at myself,

but one confrontation left no room for equivocation. The miscreant was a dirty rat. I'd say dirty little rat for emphasis but I can't because the thing was enormous — it was easily the Saint Bernard of Norway rats, with a tail that was even longer than its body.

Rats can squeeze through anything. Despite its size, the thing managed to wriggle through a hole in the wall between the house and the garage. It had gotten into a basket of potatoes in a hallway pantry. More than that, it had carried gnawed pieces of potatoes into an adjacent closet.

"Maybe it was a mouse," an exterminator told us.

"It would have to have been a very big mouse," my husband said. "Maybe it was Mighty Mouse."

A day later, my husband cornered the monster in the garage and dispatched it. All I'll say is that it wasn't a pretty sight and that I'm glad he did it. Rats are very much something else. Maybe I'm succumbing to popular revulsion but I still shudder at the thought of one violating the sanctity of my home.

A few weeks ago, my husband chased a chipmunk out of the garage and wiped out a yellow jacket nest in an abandoned vole hole in the lawn, and I wish I knew a surefire way to get rid of slugs besides stalking them in the night. This season, for the first time, voles established a subway system beneath the lawn and flowerbeds and I'm just hoping they don't come back next spring.

For the most part, though, I believe in compromise. When we moved into our home 12 years ago, we learned there were raccoon tracks inside the chimney. We had it capped and all has been well. For the most part, the same has held true since we installed a new garage door that comes flush to the ground to keep out mice. As for squirrels — well if you've had a squirrel leap on your bed in the middle of the night, you'll never think of it as cute again. Besides, the hairless babies look like rats. Sometimes, we feel like we're squatters in a squirrel metropolis. Still, I try to live and let live. I plant a lot of daffodils and fritillarias. Squirrels gobble up tulips, but they hate daffodils. We try to plant enough lettuce to feed the rabbits as well as ourselves. And we carry spiders and crickets outside and release them.

You do what you can.

This summer we spotted a fledgling Canada goose with an injured leg hopping around our yard. It had been abandoned by its flock, and as we saw it, there was only one thing to do. We chased the goose up and down the lawn and through the garden and finally managed to drape a sheet over it. Then we gathered it up and took it to a wildlife rehabilitation center. You could say we decided on doo rather than die.

Like I said, I love where I live.