

# Outwitting urban wildlife

by Sabine Eiche

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I've been pitting my wits against those of the raccoon lately. For some time I suspected my only advantage was that I knew the etymology of pit and wit and the raccoon didn't.

"Pytt" and "gewitt" are the Old English roots of these words, though "pytt" ultimately derives from the Latin noun "puteus," meaning well or pit. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, pit started to serve as a verb as well, signifying to fight or oppose – an easy conversion, because pits were the usual location for these public sparring matches. Wit refers to a certain mental quickness or liveliness. Once upon a time wit functioned as a verb – it meant to have knowledge of (it's related to the German "wissen"). The expression God wot means God knows. The verb wit also survives in the phrase to wit – meaning namely, or that is.

The raccoon was unmoved by my superior etymological knowledge. Nor was it impressed to learn that its name, which originated with the Algonquian Indians, was first recorded in 1608.

When raccoons come lumbering through the neighbourhood, crows herald their arrival by cawing threats and diving through the air like bomber pilots. The raccoons used to flee from my yard when I clapped my hands and shouted, or hurled pieces of wood at them. Not anymore. They turn a deaf ear now and seem certain that my aim hasn't improved.

They've never raided my garbage can, but regrettably, one evening I did forget to put the lid back on the compost bin. That night they attacked the

contents like frenetic shoppers storming through a sales bin. But even before that night of bliss, they came regularly and deposited their feces in the yard.

A couple of weeks ago their routine changed. Or maybe it was a new batch of raccoons. One evening, while I was working in the garden, a powerful odour descended from the sky. The last time I'd smelled something similar was in a stable with horse urine running down the centre.

A few days later, I noticed the gutter of my deck had an unusual outline. I climbed up the step-ladder and discovered a pile of raccoon feces. It had dried. I removed it. The following week, while sitting on my deck early one morning I was assailed again by that potent smell of urine. I got the step-ladder and found another pile of feces on the gutter. It was fresh. I blew my top and got my camera.

If a tolerated nuisance on the ground, raccoons on the roof were definitely verboten. I retaliated with ammonia-filled containers. They say ammonia mimics coyote urine, and raccoons supposedly fear coyotes. Well, coyotes must have lost some of their grit. My visiting raccoons treated the containers with disdain.

The time had come to play my final card – cut off access to the roof. One by one, the overhanging branches of a nearby tree came crashing to the ground. Surely I've now outwitted the raccoons. Or have I? What if they return, not outwitted but outfitted – to scale sheer house walls?