

## RUSTY'S WILDLIFE ENCOUNTER

by Lee Netzler

This was the week for wildlife! But, to tell this story, I need to begin last Saturday. That day, shortly after we woke up, Rusty, our Scottish Terrier, seemed to show an unusual interest in our wrapped Christmas presents which were stacked on the fireplace hearth. He poked his nose through them, barked, and acted very excited. Although the stack had been steadily growing from a few presents to not so few over the past couple of weeks, Rusty hadn't displayed much interest in them previously. Now, however, he was very animated--and especially vocal about them!

I figured he had just discovered that some of the presents were for him--the ones wrapped in white tissue paper that smelled so good! In any case, he was absolutely relentless about it, and all day long I had to "call him off" from his growling, occasional serious barking and persistent poking around.

Thinking that the fireplace, which we had never used in the 3½ years since moving into the house, might have attracted some nesting mice during the cold weather, I stopped at the local hardware store on Sunday and picked up some "d-con"--one package to put into the fireplace and one to put in the attached garage.

My solution didn't calm Rusty one bit. When I opened up the usually closed and latched fireplace doors to place the mouse bait inside, he really was intent on going in himself to take care of things!! I discouraged that, and assured him we had things under control. He wasn't convinced, and periodically agitated around the fireplace all day long on Sunday.

On Monday morning he was as insistent as ever. By this time we were sure that the neatly stacked Christmas presents sitting in front of the fireplace doors weren't what interested him. And, having convinced myself that we had a mouse problem, I decided to shop for a chimney cap (a fitted screen that fits over the top of the chimney) to seal the opening so that in the future mice couldn't enter from the roof by descending down the inside of the chimney.

In order to buy a chimney cap that would fit properly, I needed to measure the chimney pipe opening. So, we hauled out the ladder and I climbed up onto the roof with my tape measure and a small flashlight. I found that the upper portion of our large brick chimney has a much smaller squared clay pipe, which is the real exhaust pipe, in the center. I measured the inside and outside dimensions of the clay pipe and wrote them down.

I peered into the chimney, but couldn't see much down below. The clay pipe extended down about 8 feet, and then below that the opening widened considerably. The flue chamber area was at the bottom, about 5 feet below the end of the clay pipe, situated just above the firebox. I didn't see anything unusual except that there seemed to be some trash at the bottom. The chamber at the bottom was pretty large, though, and when looking down through the chimney pipe, I couldn't quite see to the brick sides of the cavity.

I was studying the trash with my dim flashlight, considering whether I should make a note to remove that later, when I thought I saw something move. Aha! I suspected that I had disturbed

the nesting mice and might get a glimpse of them scurrying around below.

Surprise! Surprise! I wasn't prepared for what I saw next. I was able to make out a large hairy/furry shape which was huddled at the bottom, pressing against the side of the large chamber so that it was half hidden. Sure enough, when I made noises, it moved slightly, trying to conceal itself. After a few minutes, although I couldn't see the tail or face to confirm my conclusion, I was pretty certain that it was a large raccoon!

Half an hour later the Longmont Police Animal Control Officer returned my call. From my description, she agreed that it was probably a raccoon. And, she said they commonly seek out chimneys like this and use them as nesting places, just like they would use a hollow tree. She said they are agile climbers, and that this one probably had been coming and going at night for a couple of days, making our fireplace "home" during the day.

Although she seemed sure of her theory, I wasn't as certain. I felt that the critter might not be able to climb or leap out of the large bottom chamber to get a grasp inside the smaller (1¼ inch inside diameter) slippery clay pipe above. It could have gotten down and then discovered it couldn't get back up. Well, she said that was possible, but not very likely, because raccoons are such acrobatic climbers. She did speculate, though, that it could have fallen and gotten injured, which might have prevented it from climbing back out.

What to do????! I had visions of the Raccoon SWAT Police troops cordoning off my house and yard and invading with traps and tranquilizer guns!! Instead, she offered a solution that was so simple I didn't believe my ears. In response to my disbelief, she promised that if I followed her instructions, and the raccoon was still there in 24 hours, they would come to remove it.

So, I did exactly what she said. First I lowered a thick rope down the inside of the chimney to the bottom and then securely tied it off at the top outside of the chimney. While I was doing this, I finally got to see our smiling visitor looking up at me, and indeed it was a large raccoon. Next I placed a loud radio tuned to a "Hard Rock" station inside of the firebox, directly below the chimney where the logs would ordinarily be burned. Finally, we heavily barricaded the two glass fireplace doors in case the critter somehow dropped down out of the chimney area and tried to escape inside the house.

The Animal Control Officer offered her explanation that unless the raccoon was injured, it could easily climb up the rope and out of the chimney. The noisy radio was to give it the incentive to leave. Raccoons like quiet places, and the radio playing in the fireplace provided a loud continuously annoying noise as though heard from the inside of an echo chamber. She said that the raccoon would probably stay in the chimney until dark and then would leave sometime during the night.

Well, it was high noon by the time we got our rope and radio act in place. We left home to go out for lunch and to spend the afternoon doing errands and some light shopping. We returned home about 4:30 pm, but without finding a chimney cap while shopping as we had planned to do.

Nevertheless, we had decided to temporarily cover the chimney opening once our visitor had exited. We found 2 cement blocks in the garage to place over the chimney top. Since our weather was deteriorating, snow was on the way, and it was getting dark, I decided to haul the cement blocks up onto the roof while it was still light out and before the weather worsened. I planned to check the chimney later, just before bedtime, and if the raccoon was gone, I would then place the blocks over the top of the chimney. Since I didn't want to be wrestling cement blocks onto a slippery snow-covered roof in the dark, this was the time to carry them up.

Well, guess what? When I reached the chimney and peered down along the rope I found that our guest had already climbed out and departed. (That reminds me: I need to send a note of thanks to that "hard rock" station for their effective musical selections.) So, I removed the rope, placed the cement blocks on top of the chimney, and climbed down off the roof. We un-barricaded the fireplace doors, checked from below to make sure that the fellow was actually gone, and life as we once knew it pleasantly returned to our home address.

Rusty carefully inspected everything and confirmed that we were no longer living in Longmont Wildlife Central. During the evening he made a few more trips over to the fireplace to check things out, but merely growled and muttered quietly. The first thing he did on Tuesday morning was to run over to the fireplace and thoroughly inspect things again. Once he was satisfied that his diligence had permanently driven the wild intruder away, he relaxed and focused on a much more important task--breakfast!! At that moment I knew for sure that our small world had finally returned to normal.