

On the Trail With Urban Trappers

County Company Won Renown for Catching Tidal Basin Beavers

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John Adcock Jr. picked up the phone and said, "Kathi, line one, mice." Soon, another call: "Squirrels in Potomac, Michelle, talk to him."

They are as busy as, well, beavers these days at Adcock's Trapping Service, the College Park-based company that raised its public profile with the successful entrapment of three beavers chewing up cherry trees near the Tidal Basin.

But the truth is, as Adcock will tell you, though the publicity was great, the damage downtown was small. You want to see some real beaver damage? Or see what other critters can do to homes, to apartments, to nature itself? Adcock sees it all the time—and he will tell you it's not pretty.

Take beavers. There's an area off Bradley Boulevard in Bethesda that looks like the Chain Saw Massacre—as many as 30 trees lying like parallel log bridges across a creek. Adcock's crews trapped five beavers there and are trying to protect the surviving trees by wrapping them in wire mesh fencing.

"That's the worst amount of damage I've ever seen," Adcock said. He's also seen four-foot-high piles of bat guano in church belfries, rats destroying attic crawl spaces and squirrels "totally devastating the [electrical] wiring. I really want to know how many fires written up as electrical were really caused by animals eating up the wires, getting the [electrical] arc going. . . ."

Not that Adcock has anything against animals, you understand. They are, after all, his bread and butter. He much prefers to relocate rather than destroy them, so that they may live to infest another day. To him, it's not merely humanity, it's "job security."

So while practitioners go for the kill, Adcock says, "I one-way trap door just about everything I can. . . . We're kind of innovators." The kind of animal control Adcock practices is clearly big business: His firm is a \$1 million a year operation with

16 employees and 14 trucks.

He dutifully follows the rules, and the leads he learned from his father, who founded the business 20 years ago and who now, at 60, is living in retirement in Ocean City, Md.

Every jurisdiction has different requirements, so Adcock and his crews have to know the law along with the lore. In the District, Adcock and his trappers



move beavers to other habitats. That's what the regulations demand. In Maryland, however, it's a different story. The state requires that certain potentially rabies-carrying animals be killed once caught. So in the Free State, it's *sagonara* for beavers, raccoons, foxes and rats.

Bats are safe—at least for now. The population of those notorious night-flying mammals had dropped dramatically, so the state took them off the hit list. They are legally protected May to September, the months in which litters are born.

And bats aren't all bad, Adcock notes: They consume half their body weight in mosquitoes in one night.

Adcock wasn't planning to go into animal control. He thought he didn't "want any part of this business because it involved a lot of nasty things, cutting dead animals out of people's walls." So as soon as he turned 18, he signed up for six years in the Navy. After graduating from technical school, however, he was bored and began counting the days until his discharge.

"I much prefer to be out meeting people, on the go, helping people out," he said. "It's a lot more satisfying than working with a test probe. . . . This is kind of my legacy. I kind of learned it at my dad's knee."

His father and mentor, John Adcock Sr., began catching critters half a century ago, as a child in the wilds of Rogers Heights, an older subdivision off Kenilworth Avenue near Bladensburg. He trapped muskrats and minks in several streams, most of them now inside culverts.

"I trapped for fur until I was in my twenties thirties," the senior Adcock said. "It was something you did in the wintertime to supplement your income."

Trapping for pelts here has declined, he said, since the Soviet Union disintegrated, dumping its superior Eastern European fur on the world market. This turn of events made "especially East American fur pretty much useless."

Adcock was a construction worker when he turned his trapping expertise into a full-time business, at first driving trucks without the company name, "almost as if I was ashamed of what I was doing. Finally, I said the heck with this. I painted our trucks red and put 'Adcock's Trapping' in 1 1/2 letters."

More than pride was at stake. "We were working nights. I was afraid of being mistaken for a burglar and getting shot."

Today John Jr., 35, runs the company as its vice president, with brother Michael Adcock, 31, trapping animals, and sister Michelle, 29, scheduling the office along with Kathi Hayes, 29, scheduling jobs and keeping track of crews. Altogether, John Jr. estimates, Adcock's handles about 5,000 calls a year. Fees for most jobs run from \$150 to \$250.

Adcock's work force inspects, traps and modifies structures to make them animal-proof. But far as, say, raccoons in the trash, Adcock says, "You're probably better off investing in a good set of galvanized cans every six months or so. . . ."

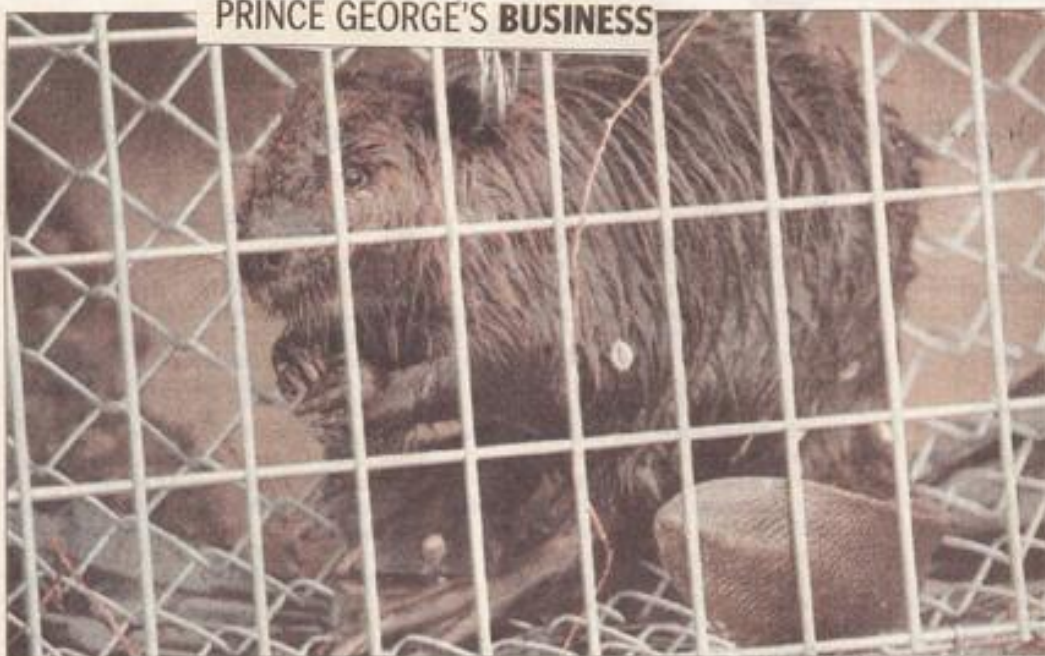
"We encourage people to modify their habits and behavior," he said, with this caveat, "If it



Steven Smolgas, of Adcock's Trapping Service, carries several rat traps baited with peanut butter—smooth, not crunchy.

ppers

PRINCE GEORGE'S BUSINESS



PHOTOS BY JAMES M. THREAS—THE WASHINGTON POST



Far left, Steven Smelgus used a fiber-optic scope in late April to look for nesting raccoons above the bedroom of a home in Cleveland Park, in Northwest Washington. Above and left, a second beaver was carried away from the Tidal Basin on April 11 after being caught by Adcock's service in the Washington Channel entrance to the basin. The trapping of the animals that menaced Washington's famed cherry trees raised the profile of the College Park service.

want to pay, we got to play, because if we don't, someone else will."

Adcock's office bookshelves are lined with books and booklets about construction, carpentry and animals: "Outwitting Squirrels," "Bats of the Eastern U.S." There also are videos about Eastern moles and how to "eliminate" them.

A wall shopping list includes mask filters, caulk, aluminum coils, trash bags and, in large letters, "YARDINES." "When I go to the Food Lion, I say, 100 cans," Michelle Adcock said. "They say, 'What are you doing?' The answer: baiting raccoon traps."

Other staples are peanut butter for rat traps and peanuts for squirrels, the removal of which accounts for 60 percent of the firm's business. "They're up in the attics eating wires and waking residents] up at dawn," Adcock said.

As the company's sweat shirt says, "If it runs, crawls, climbs, slithers or flies, we'll catch it."

Adcock's crews range across the region, but "the bulk of our income is probably out of D.C. and Montgomery," the senior Adcock says. John Jr. said Prince George's also has become fertile territory for the trappers, especially with the construction of upscale homes in the Lake Arbor-Mitchellville area. New homes just about anywhere, he explained, are good bets for local wildlife, because today's construction leaves spaces for animals to enter and also curtails their natural habitat.

"Certain things happen certain times of the year," Adcock said. "Two months from now, it'll be snake bell. Right now, it's squirrel-raccoon time."

Adcock's crews use sophisticated equipment to locate them. By drilling small holes in a wall or ceiling, they can peer through a borescope into attic crawl spaces and walls. Wherever possible, they prefer to "go structurally and put in one-way doors rather than remove the animals [entirely] from their environment."

On a recent gray day, Adcock and his foreman Steven Smelgus, 32, set out in a shiny red pickup to check out rats in Kalorama, raccoons in Cleveland Park, beavers in Bethesda and foxes in Potomac. What they found was lots of evidence but no critters. They surveyed the scenes, set traps, made recommendations and scheduled follow-ups.

Driving down into Washington, Adcock pointed out houses and apartments they had worked in, including ambassadors' residences and homes of the rich and reclusive—quickly revealing that Adcock's knowledge of the area is as intimate as it is extensive. Adcock told of one job, removing raccoons from an ambassador's back yard because they were snatching the fish from an ornamental pond. "Usually, it's rats and pigeons."

Inside a Kalorama mansion under renovation, they discovered that two broken water mains had caused an invasion of sewer rats. They baited several traps and vowed to return.

On Newark Street NW in Cleveland Park, they drilled holes in a bedroom ceiling in search of raccoon babies left in the attic after Adcock's had trapped the mother. Smelgus could not locate them with the borescope, but a day later they would be found and removed. Nearby Highland Street NW,

Adcock said, was "squirrel central, raccoon central. For a small street, we received an awful lot of calls. They're kind of our bread and butter." Off Bradley Boulevard, Adcock noted the methodical way the beavers had committed tree surgery. "Doesn't it look like a tractor went through here?" he said.

Finally, in Potomac, they searched for foxes that had been frightening neighbors whose homes back onto Cabin John Regional Park.

"We have deer, but the foxes are quite scary," said Shari Golub, 32, whose two children, ages 7 and 3, played nearby. "They love seeing them. They say the babies are so cute. I'm saying, 'They could eat you up in a gulp.'"

Adcock and Smelgus found the den, a cavern cut into a hillside and hidden by bushes. They poured ammonia into the openings, but no foxes emerged. They told Golub and a neighbor that a daily dose of the stuff should flush them out. They also recommended clearing the brush, breaking up an eroded concrete spillway, excavating and sealing off the cavern. For that and additional work required, the cost would be \$1,200.

The bottom line, as the men told Golub, was the foxes would remain in the area because, after all, it's their turf. Moreover, he said, neighbors who feed the birds in their back yards are effectively inviting all God's creatures to supper. Don't do it, they said.

"The animals are pretty easy to deal with," Adcock said, on the way back to College Park. "It's the people that are really difficult."