Urban Wildlife and the Dangers of Littering

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Awoken by unfamiliar sounds in the middle of the night, Graham found a flashlight to illuminate the window well outside his bedroom and immediately recognized the distinctive black and white fur of a young skunk. But his head was encased in a paper cup with a plastic dome-shaped lid encircling his neck and he was desperately trying to knock the cup off by striking it against a large stone in the window well. There was really nothing that could be done in the dark, so Graham waited for dawn, listening to the sounds of the young, frightened skunk struggling with the cardboard cup. When the sun came up, there was no sign of the cup as, unable to dislodge it, he had eaten it, which was probably not good for his digestive tract. But the large clear plastic lid still encircled his neck, rather like an Elizabethan collar.



The building we live in is a Zen monastery, Dainen-ji, also known as the Zen Centre of Ottawa of the White Wind Zen Community. The Zen Centre is a 140 year-old heritage building on the corner of Daly Ave and Friel St in Sandy Hill. It is a beautiful area, especially in the summer, with a lush canopy of trees and carefully tended gardens. This is a residential neighbourhood which also accommodates a very large number of university students as well as a diverse range of urban wildlife, most notably groundhogs, raccoons, skunks, and many varieties of birds. Many of these come to and are nourished by Dainen-ji and its grounds and waterfall garden.

And then there is the litter. People park their cars and empty their garbage onto the streets; students drop pizza boxes, beer bottles, and other assorted garbage wherever they happen to be when they finish with them. All litter is unpleasant for residents and detrimental to wildlife, but of particular danger to skunks is the plastic dome-shaped lids with a large hole in the top which come with these containers: McDonald's "McFlurry", Tim Horton's "Iced Capp" and Wendy's "Frosty". Bubble tea lids also have a similar plastic dome-shaped lid.

Skunks are inquisitive creatures, with poor eyesight but an excellent sense of smell. They are drawn to the smell of ice cream or beverages in these cups, and their pointed faces fit inside the hole in the dome-shaped lid. But once they push their head through the lid, it is impossible for them to free themselves. With this Elizabethan torture device firmly lodged around their neck, a growing skunk suffers dreadfully from the abrasions caused by the plastic lid rubbing against their skin and dies of slow strangulation. The lucky ones might be saved through surgery, but often if people do find them in this condition they just kill them.



However, this skunk managed to find the right window well to fall into. By 5:00 a.m. the monastics and other students who live in the Zen Centre had completed Shinrei (Morning Bells) and beginning to consider how to best handle this. Various options were considered, including how we might tranquilize the skunk and various emails were sent and telephone calls were made, all while preparing for the formal sitting at 6 a.m. This then continued from 7:45 while breakfast and preparations for the 9:30 general sitting were occurring. A veterinarian wished us luck because we wouldn't be able to sedate the skunk, most people just kill them. It seemed that we might have to just risk getting sprayed despite the Introduction To Zen workshop scheduled for the afternoon and having the pungent odour be part of how the public were introduced to us.

We called the animal rescue service of the Ottawa Humane Society again, and they sent Desiree, an officer who was obviously very experienced in handling skunks. She sat next to the window well and spoke softly to the skunk for a good 20 minutes to calm him down. Then she very slowly climbed into the well, holding a blanket which she draped over the skunk. And he promptly sprayed, but he sprayed the blanket not her. She reached under the blanket with a gloved hand and pulled the lid off, then lifted him out of the window well. The skunk was last seen running away at high speed (well, high speed for a skunk, that is).



This needless suffering could be avoided by making sure that we throw bubble lids away and pick up ones we see on the street. Cutting them in half ensures that they won’t end up around the neck of a skunk after a racoon has raided your garbage can and scattered its contents on the sidewalk. Even better: don’t buy the lids and write to your local purveyor of fast-food to request they change the design of the lids. A public campaign worked in England, where such drink tops had been strangling hedgehogs. A similar campaign would be good for Canadian cities.