

Game hunters find smaller prey

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Contributor

CANON CITY, Colo. — From stalking and hunting big game to annoying pests isn't the stretch most would envision.

Dan Gates of Cañon City, Colorado started hunting Colorado big game in 1973. And although he and his son, Ethan, have hunted eland, wildebeest and impala in Africa, this summer they have been busy catching much smaller species.

The father and son team started Colorado Rid-A-Critter in 2002 after getting many requests from Fremont County residents to help them trap nuisance animals around their homes.

Bats, birds, rodents, skunks and snakes are some of the wildlife that invade residents' homes and yards. Construction disturbs ground squirrels and prairie dogs, so they go looking for new places to build their homes. Often established neighborhoods with their landscaping are more attractive to these native animals than the dry desert that is being excavated, so the conflict begins.

Ground squirrels burrow under foundations and take up residence in crawl spaces where they raise their brood and investigate the great trails of electrical wiring and plumbing. They're gnawing creatures and often the insulation on wires or plastic pipes become chew toys for their ever-growing teeth. Any small place with access is an invitation for homesteading to these

prolific rodents. Sometimes their burrows so erode the soil supporting stem walls that major foundation work is required.

Capturing and eliminating or relocating the invaders is the job that Dan and Ethan do. Relocating wildlife requires a permit from the Department of Wildlife which Gates can obtain. Skunks can't be relocated because of their status as host carriers for rabies according to DOW and Colorado Department of Health regulations.

In the first two-thirds of the 20th Century when Colorado was primarily an agricultural state and vast herds of sheep and cattle roamed most of the land, ranchers and farmers controlled prairie dogs and predators with poisons. In the 1970's the federal government imposed restrictions on the use of poisons because of the impact poisoning prey species had on animals higher on the food chain. A prairie dog ingests poison, is eaten by a ferret that then is eaten by a bald eagle that dies from the prairie dog poisoning. As Colorado changed from agriculture and hunting lifestyles to environmental and recre-



Dan and Ethan Gates show part of their winter harvest of furs obtained from damage control and recreational trapping.

photo provided

ational, stricter regulations were imposed.

Dan Gates views Colorado as a state comprised of two split entities: agriculture, renewable resource groups versus environmental, recreational groups. The latter wants to protect wildlife, know the animals are there, and see them; but really don't want the critters tearing up their lawns, eating their landscaping and getting into their homes or eating their pets. Problems arise when homeowners plant tasty shrubs and plants. Desert areas where deer were seldom seen are now home to the native browsers because irrigated shrubs provide forage and water.

Many of the calls that Gates receive could be avoided with common sense. According to

the professional trappers, people will trap nocturnal animals, like bats, raccoons or skunks, in their attics or crawl spaces by sealing up the holes in the daytime.

The animals' only escape avenues are openings into the house which then create havoc and sometimes fear for the homeowner.

Squirrels and birds often get shuttered into houses when home owners make evening repairs.

Feeding pets outside also presents problems for homeowners. This practice attracts feral cats and raccoons. The Gates trap as many or more feral cats as any other wildlife species. They recommend that

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photo provided
14-year-old Ethan Gates shows two of the many rattlesnakes that he's caught; he sells the skins in his parent's store, Traders of the Bighorn.

people don't leave cat or dog food outside if they don't want to attract wild animals that may carry disease. This summer has been exceptionally busy for the varmint catching duo. Although southern Colorado is still suffering drought conditions, the moisture is up 100 percent from last year, creating more plants so more young prey animals survive, making more food for rattlesnakes, coyotes and bobcats and their young to flourish.

In winter, the Gates are able to harvest the furs of the large animals they trap. Their primary business, Traders of the Bighorn in Cañon City, is a retail outlet for beaver, coyote, bobcat, skunk and raccoon furs.

Ethan is a real asset to Rid-A-Critter because of his size. He is able to crawl into attics and crawl spaces where his dad wouldn't fit. He runs his own winter trap lines, servicing dairies, orchards, farms and land owners. School homework is often completed while Dan drives him to his next trap. In the winter, other than school time, Ethan, "traps all day and skins all night," right along side his dad. Ethan hopes to go to college and become a government trapper, "so I'll be out doing what I like to do all the time and get paid for it."