

This story first appeared as a "Suburban Diary" in the Boston Globe on Sept. 13, 2007

Living so close to nature takes some getting used to

By David Rattigan

When adults have small children, all rabbits become bunnies and all dogs become puppies, even the ones that are 12 years old. This transformation in the vocabulary of other adults always amused me, and now that I have a small child it amuses me in a different way.

Gazing at the spacious backyard of our new home in a suburban neighborhood, it's nice to hold my daughter and watch the bunnies. On sunny, dewy mornings it resembles an old Disney cartoon as they run through the daylilies, weeds, and crab grass.

"It's good that you have 'bunnies,'" said my friend Reiniger, a longtime resident of rural Rowley.

"When they disappear, you'll know the coyotes have moved in," Reiniger said. "When it comes to coyotes, bunnies are like the canary in a coal mine."

I once read that city dwellers should never go camping, because the silence drives them crazy. They're so used to the din of their environment that they can't relax without it. They hear nothing, and jump out of their sleeping bags at the hoot of an owl.

Having lived on a main street in downtown Peabody, and for a couple of years in New York City, I will add that quiet, leafy streets also take some getting used to. The cars and radios and sirens may no longer be part of my home life, but my neighbor will start his lawnmower, and I'll shout, "Honey, duck for cover! Grab the gun!" (I don't actually own a gun, but think this would be a deterrent to home invaders.)

It is a different kind of neighborhood, where the other homeowners actually talk to us. It's creepy.

But here, as in any pleasant suburb, there are other issues. I have yet to look out my front window to see a

person being handcuffed, but there's a whole different kind of wildlife to be concerned about.

Skunks, raccoons, squirrels, possums, and porcupines all fare better in suburban settings, where they can eat fast food from your garbage can, than they do in the wild.

And their more predatory brethren, the coyotes, foxes and fisher cats, have followed them to the land of backyard pools and barbecues.

Every time we get heavy rain, I expect to see a beaver setting up shop in the yard, ready to flood my basement.

This summer there has been a bear sighting in Lynnfield, fisher cats in Beverly, and recently the report of a "vicious deer" in Danvers. When Bambi attacks, that can't be good for property values.

While the small mammals make us nervous about rabies and keep us vigilant in watching over our children and pets, some of the biggest danger comes from the smallest creatures.

Mosquitoes carry deadly West Nile and EEE viruses, and the vector for Lyme disease is the deer tick. And you know what other animal carries the deer tick? The field mouse.

Wildlife biologists say that living in company with wild animals is just something that suburbanites should get used to. They say that reports of animal sightings slow down once people get used to seeing them. The experts advise homeowners to take precautions, like covering their trash cans and checking regularly for deer ticks, but say there's little choice other than adapting to their presence.

Which is where experience in an urban environment becomes beneficial. Part of adapting to city life is developing a sense of fatalism, accepting that there are some things beyond your control. For instance, the first week I lived in New York City, there were two or three stories on the TV news about people on the sidewalk being killed by bricks or other pieces of buildings falling off and hitting them. After that, I never heard news stories about that type of incident. My theory is that it didn't stop happening, but that the next time the report of a falling-debris fatality

came into the newsroom, some editor decided it was no longer news.

You can wear long sleeves at dusk, and take other precautions against virus-spreading insects, but at some point you simply need to get used to things.

That's the plan, anyway.